

interzone

interzone

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

stories

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Ray Cluley
Lavie Tidhar
Elizabeth Bourne
Tracie Welser

illustrations

Ben Baldwin
Jim Burns
Kurt Huggins & Zelda Devon
Richard Wagner
Mark Pexton

news & reviews

David Langford's Ansible Link
Book Zone
Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn
Tony Lee's Laser Fodder
Readers' Poll Results

ISSUE 240 • MAY-JUN 2012 • STILL ONLY £3.95

Nancy Kress

interviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller



PRINTED IN THE UK

Publisher

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham,
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Worldwide Distribution

Pineapple Media: pineapple-media.com

Central Books: centralbooks.com

WWMD: specialistmags.co.uk

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INTERFACE



FICTION

THE HANGED MAN by BEN BALDWIN
benbaldwin.co.uk



REVIEWS





4

ANSIBLE LINK by DAVID LANGFORD 2-3
news, obituaries

READERS' POLL 4-5
results, comments

FREE INTERZONE 2011 SAMPLER (PDF)

ttapress.com/interzone/



6

BEASTS
ELIZABETH BOURNE 6-16
illustrated by Martin Hanford
martinhanford1974.deviantart.com



18

THE INDIGNITY OF RAIN
LAVIE TIDHAR 18-23
illustrated by Richard Wagner
email: rwagnerenon@att.net



24

SEEKING CAPTAIN RANDOM
VYLAR KAFTAN 24-29
illustrated by Kurt Huggins & Zelda Devon
www.teeteringbulb.com



30

BLOODCLOTH
RAY CLULEY 30-38
illustrated by Jim Burns
www.alisoneldred.com/artistJimBurns.html

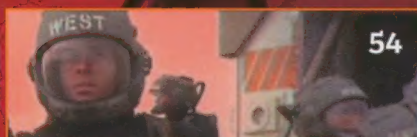


40

A BODY WITHOUT FUR
TRACIE WELSER 40-45
illustrated by Mark Pexton
markofthedead.deviantart.com

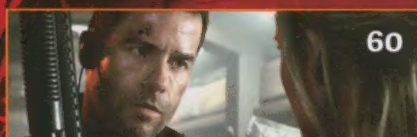
MORE REVIEWS IN BLACK STATIC

ttapress.com/blackstatic/



54

BOOK ZONE 46-53
book reviews, including Nancy Kress interview, by
Maureen Kincaid Speller, Jim Steel, Stephen Theaker,
Elaine Gallagher, Paul F. Cockburn, John Howard, Ian
Hunter, Jack Deighton



60

LASER FODDER by TONY LEE 54-59
blu-ray/DVD reviews: current and forthcoming releases

MUTANT POPCORN by NICK LOWE 60-64
film reviews: the latest cinema releases



Readers' Poll

Congratulations to Richard Wagner for topping the art poll with 'Relics', his cover for issue #234 (above), and to Nina Allan and Suzanne Palmer, who tied for top spot with their stories 'The Silver Wind' and 'The Ceiling is Sky', respectively. The results are overleaf, along with a cross section of opinions. Many more votes came in with very encouraging comments. Thank you.

By the time you read this there should be a free PDF of your favourite 2011 stories on the website, with the winning cover and a selection of the year's nonfiction. Hopefully it'll make an ideal sampler for new and potential readers, so feel free to download and spread it around as much as you want.

Interaction

You've might've tried to register for the Interaction forum recently but failed, thanks to a problem caused by spambots. Happy to say that this problem has now been fixed and registrations are once again possible, so please try again. It'd be great to see the forum as lively again as it once was.

Prices

As warned last year, and thanks mostly to the recent huge hike in postage costs, we've had to raise subscription prices slightly. However, we've also attempted to make longer term subscriptions more attractive – dual subscriptions to *Interzone* plus *Black Static*, for example, now save more money, and lifetime subscriptions remain unchanged. It probably seems unfair that some subscriptions have gone up while the cover price hasn't, but unfortunately that's still locked in for a short while yet.

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others See Race. There was a storm in a twittercup as watchers of *The Hunger Games* tweeted bitterly that characters described in the novel as 'dark brown' or with 'dark skin' are, shockingly, portrayed in the film by black actors. One twit felt this 'kinda ruined the movie'; another asked 'why did the producer make all the good characters black'.

Christopher Priest opened this year's traditional grumbling about the Clarke Award with a tasty blog polemic against the 'dreadful' shortlist (excepting Jane Rogers's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*) and the 'incompetent' judges who picked it (all of whom, he urged, should resign). Most-quoted lines concerned Sheri S. Tepper's *The Waters Rising* – 'For fuck's sake, it is a quest saga and it has a talking horse.' – and Charles Stross's *Rule 34*: 'Stross writes like an internet puppy', goading Mr Stross to design Internet Puppy T-shirts for Eastercon. The controversy made it into the *Guardian* and presumably boosted public awareness of the award...

Award Season. Arthur C. Clarke: Jane Rogers, *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. • British SF Association. Novel: Christopher Priest, *The Islanders*. (Priest to audience of voters: 'I suppose you all have to

resign now.') Short: Paul Cornell, 'The Copenhagen Interpretation' (*Asimov's*). Artwork: Dominic Harman. Nonfiction: John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, Third Edition*. • James Tiptree Jr: Andrea Hairston, *Redwood and Wildfire*. • Philip K. Dick: Simon Morden, the Samuil Petrovitch trilogy (*Equations of Life, Theories of Flight, Degrees of Freedom*). • Pilgrim (sf studies): Pamela Sargent. • SF Hall of Fame: Joe Haldeman, James Tiptree Jr., James Cameron, Virgil Finlay. • SFWA Solstice Award: Octavia Butler (posthumously), John Clute. • Hugo Shortlist: censored on grounds of interminability; see chicon.org for the full list. Novel finalists: Jo Walton, *Among Others*; George R.R. Martin, *A Dance With Dragons*; Mira Grant, *Deadline*; China Miéville, *Embassytown*; James S.A. Corey, *Leviathan Wakes*. In other categories dear to my heart, the *Encyclopedia of SF* appears as Related Work and *Interzone* as Semiprozine.

Publishers & Sinners. Tom Doherty Associates announced that by early July, ebooks from all its imprints (Tor, Forge, Orb etc) would be free of irritating DRM protection. Tor UK followed suit. This, Baen Books smirked, has been Baen policy for over ten years. • Penguin UK is reviving the glorious tradition of Penguin SF with a new imprint called, actually, Berkley UK.

As Others See Us. A.A. Gill knows our secret: '...people who don't like or understand literature read science fiction.' (*Paper View*, 2008)

Iain Gray, the former Scots Labour leader who presided over his party's humiliating defeat in Scotland's last parliamentary election, confesses in *The Scotsman* that he loves Iain M. Banks but wasn't then allowed to say so: 'those around me felt that admitting to enjoying science fiction would be political suicide.' (*Scotsman.com*) The triumph of the SNP's Alex Salmond, a long-uncloseted *Star Trek* fan, suggests that honesty may have its advantages even in politics.

Court Circular. The Philip K. Dick estate's suit against Media Rights Capital regarding *Adjustment Bureau* fees (based on a highly dubious copyright-renewal claim) was dropped when a federal court judge 'dismissed key claims' but re-filed in state court, while MRC has a federal-

court countersuit asking for a ruling that Dick's original story is indeed in the public domain. (*Hollywood Reporter*)

Robert Holdstock is remembered in the revamped British Fantasy Awards rules, where Best Novel has been split: the August Derleth Award for horror and the Robert Holdstock Award for fantasy.

As Others See Us II. The problem with *John Carter*: 'I wouldn't trust the sanity of any critic who claimed to understand what goes on in this movie. I should add, though, that I haven't any idea of how Burroughs's gibberish should have been adapted. The Therns, the Tharks, Dejah Thoris? You can't speak the names aloud without sounding like Daffy Duck.' (*New Yorker*) The BBC website eruditely added, 'Disney has admitted that *John Carter*, based on the books of Conan the Barbarian author Edgar Rice Burroughs, will end up as a \$200m (£126m) hole in its pocket.' – but later changed Conan to Tarzan.

Media Awards. *The Register's* straw poll for Worst Movie Ever heaped its ultimate dishonour on *Battlefield Earth* (1454 votes), followed by *The Phantom Menace* (1022) and *Twilight* (998).

J.K. Rowling is still news even for not being news: *Telegraph* coverage of the latest Forbes billionaires' list was headlined 'JK Rowling fortune under vanishing spell' to mark her absence owing to charitable donations and the UK's 'heavy taxation burden'.

Super-Irony. The original cheque for \$130, with which Detective Comics (later DC) bought all rights to Superman from his creators Siegel and Shuster, sold at auction for \$160,000. (BBC)

Thog's Masterclass. Runaway Metaphor Dept. 'England was such a little place. It would take so short a time to fan the poison out all over her lovely petite body.' (Margery Allingham, *Traitor's Purse*, 1941) • Dept of Melodious Twangs. 'The silence between them was as audible as the twang of an overstrained rope.' (Barbara Hambly, *The Ladies of Mandrigyn*, 1984) • Nicholson Baker Memorial Euphemism Dept. 'I had too much altar boy in me to seize the bitch goddess of success by her ponytail and bugger the Zeitgeist with my throbbing baguette.' (James Walcott, *Lucking Out*, 2011)

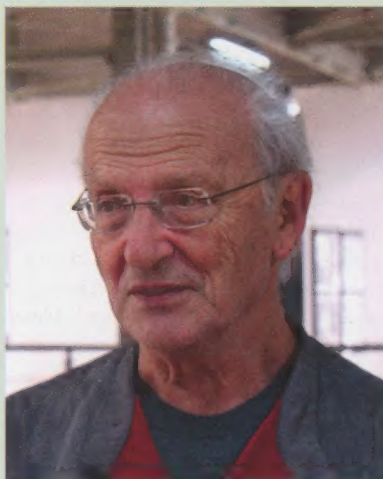
R.I.P.

M.A.R. Barker (Prof. Muhammad Abd-al-Rahman Barker, 1929–2012), creator of the extraordinarily detailed science-fantasy world *Tékumel* as a setting for the role-playing game *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), died on 16 March aged 83. Barker also wrote five *Tékumel* novels.

Christine Brooke-Rose (1923–2012), Swiss-born UK novelist and academic critic whose linguistically inventive fiction includes such sf novels as *Xorandor* (1986) and *Verbivore* (1990), died on 21 March at the age of 89.

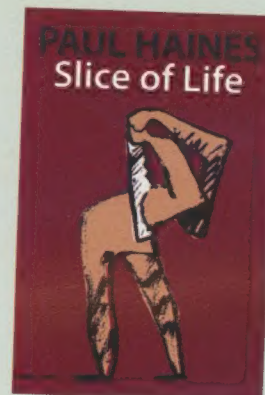
Ernest Callenbach (1929–2012), author of the high-selling sf *Ecotopia* (1975) and related utopian fiction and nonfiction urging sustainable development, died on 16 April; he was 83.

Gene DeWeese (1934–2012), US author who contributed fiction to the *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Star Trek*, *Dinotopia* and other franchises, died on 19 March aged 78. With Robert Coulson he wrote the recursive sf romps *Now You See It/Him/Them* (1975) and *Charles Fort Never Mentioned Wombats* (1977).



▲ **Jean Giraud** (1938–2012), highly prolific and influential French comics artist who cofounded the seminal magazine *Métal Hurlant* in 1975, died on 10 March aged 73. Much of his sf work appeared as by Moebius. Genre films using his design concepts include *Alien*, *Tron*, *The Abyss* and *The Fifth Element*. He was commissioned to draw a 1988

French postage stamp in honour of himself, and inducted into the SF Hall of Fame in 2011.



▲ **Paul Haines** (1970–2012), New Zealand-born horror and sf author who won several Australian Ditmar and Aurealis fiction awards, died on 5 March; he was 41.

Elyse Knox Harmon (1917–2012), US actress fondly remembered for screaming, fainting and being carried off by a heavily bandaged Lon Chaney in *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), died on 16 February; she was 94.

Hans Kneifel (1936–2012), German sf author who published his first novel in 1956, wrote over 80 Perry Rhodan books and scores more for other shared-world franchises, and returned to standalone work from the 1990s, died on 7 March aged 75.

Peter Phillips (1920–2012), UK author of 21 short sf stories 1948–1957, died on 28 March; he was 92. He is best remembered for 'Dreams Are Sacred' (1948 *Astounding*), perhaps the earliest sf precursor of *Inception*.

Nick Webb (1949–2012), UK editor and publisher who among many other achievements commissioned Douglas Adams's first *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* novelization and (a quarter of a century later) wrote the official Adams biography *Wish You Were Here*, died on 10 April.

K.D. (Kathy Diane) Wentworth (1951–2012), US author whose first of several solo sf novels was *Moon Speaker* (1994), died on 18 April aged 61. She also collaborated twice with Eric Flint.

READERS' POLL

MOST POPULAR FICTION OF 2011

- 1st= **The Silver Wind**
Nina Allan (#233)
The Ceiling is Sky
Suzanne Palmer (#234)
- 3rd For Love's Delirium Haunts...
Mercurio D. Rivera (#235)
- 4th Insha'Allah
Matthew Cook (#235)
- 5th= Tethered
Mercurio D. Rivera (#236)
The Last Osama
Lavie Tidhar (#237)
- 7th= The Ever-Dreaming Verdict...
Jason Sanford (#236)
In the Season of the Mango Rains
Lavie Tidhar (#234)
- 9th= Intellectual Property
Michael R. Fletcher (#232)
The Metaphor
Fiona Moore (#236)

MOST POPULAR ART OF 2011

- 1st **Richard Wagner**
Relics (cover #234)
- 2nd= Richard Wagner
55 Bel Air (cover #232)
Richard Wagner
Beacon (cover #236)
- 4th= Richard Wagner
Divergence (cover #235)
Richard Wagner
Babel II (cover #237)
- 6th= Richard Wagner
Omega (cover #233)
Ben Baldwin
The Silver Wind (#233)
Paul Drummond
Tethered to the Cold and Dying (#233)
Ben Baldwin
Tethered (#236)
- 10th Jim Burns
The Ever-Dreaming Verdict... (#236)

Thanks once again to everybody who sent in votes and comments. Please don't forget that you can make your views known throughout the year by making use of your Interaction forum (ttapress.com/forum), our Facebook page, or by sending a letter/email to the editorial address on the inside front cover.

Stephen Tollyfield

2011 was the year I rediscovered J.G. Ballard; a copy of *Vermillion Sands* – borrowed from the library as a teenager – left a lasting impression of how good short stories can be. A lucky find in a remaindered bookshop gave me Volume 1 of his short stories in which he writes that there are no perfect novels, but there are perfect short stories. Nina Allan's 'The Silver Wind' was as perfect a story as any I have read this year – Ballard's included – and I will be disappointed if it does not top the Readers' Poll. I am quite happy to learn that it forms part of a longer work. I appreciate stories with continuing characters, such as Christa in 'The Ever-Dreaming Verdict of Plagues' by Jason Sanford and ongoing linked stories, such as Mercurio D. Rivera's Wergen universe stories – both were good. I am the kind of Science Fiction reader that likes serials in his magazine. I either want the emotional quality and intensity of Allan or Sanford or good racy pulp fiction.

Despite his own perception as being an interloper in the world of SF, in hindsight Ballard appears the perfect *Interzone* contributor and the magazine's championing him over the years entirely justified. His work now reads as pitch perfect and prophetic. Try this from *High Rise*: "Laing pondered this – sometimes he found it difficult not to believe that they were living in a future that had already taken place, and was now exhausted."

Which brings me to one concern. The stories in issue #237 certainly touched on Ballardian themes – art history, international affairs, the state of the film business – and the three stories in question all start very well but somehow in each story the desire to make a point seemed to outweigh the story quality. The one other story – 'Insect Joy' – I felt really belonged in *Black Static*.

That one small quibble aside, another good year.

Ray Cluley

I love *Interzone*. I've been reading the magazine for about seven years now and it's provided a great load of stories in those years. Truth of it is, there wasn't a single story I didn't like (and I wouldn't make negative comments anyway, one person's junk being another one's treasure and all that) but it's time again for the Readers' Poll, so here are my favourites. I've tried to be pickier this year, narrowing it down to a top five. They're not in any particular order

of preference, though – I couldn't bring myself to be too be that picky...

From issue #235, 'For Love's Delirium Haunts the Fractured Mind' by Mercurio D. Rivera. I've enjoyed all of his Wergen stories so far, including 'Tethered' from issue #236, but this one was particularly touching and I only allow myself one story per writer in my list of favourites (a silly rule, as it's all about the story really, but let's not argue). I particularly liked seeing the 'love' concept developed in this, and the ambiguity regarding the Suppressor, the first person perspective providing a powerfully emotional sympathetic view of the Wergen race.

Also from #235, Gareth L. Powell's 'Eleven Minutes'. It's lighter than the usual *Interzone* story, providing an original look at the search for extraterrestrials. Not only is the relationship between Gary and Carl presented with an effectively humorous tone, but it has some sharp exchanges of dialogue and one of the most satisfying endings I've read in a while. I can imagine hardcore sci-fi fans having a different view of this story, perhaps, but for me it was a pleasant and refreshing change. We all know *Interzone* presents stories with big ideas and clever concepts, but it was good to have so much unapologetic fun with one. Here you get airships and parallel universes with a punch line.

Two more favourites from one issue, this time #236 (which is perhaps my favourite issue of the year overall). I thoroughly enjoyed Stephen Kotowych's 'A Time For Raven'. Eloquent in its execution, the tone serene and sorrowful in equal measure, this story is one that feels like it's more than just a story. It feels important, but it doesn't force its ecological message down the reader's throat and the story even manages to finish on a satisfying note of hope. There's a convincing exploration of character here, too, and although each has suffered his fair share of loss we get a sense of what they were before this, each rooted to the land in a similar way to the martyred tree. Loved it.

'The Metaphor' by Fiona Moore is my other favourite from these pages. It could have easily been too clever for itself, or it could have frustrated a canny reader by trying to hide too much of what may have already been guessed, but it did neither. Instead, it provided just enough information in the italic intervals (they reminded me, suitably enough, of the pauses games have when loading the next section) that the reader felt no need to

guess alongside the confused narrator; this everyman 'hero' explored enough possibilities that we could appreciate his confusion without feeling frustrated by it. 'The Metaphor' wears its existentialist concerns on its virtual sleeve, and anyone who has ever 'lived' within the fictional world provided by games consoles these days will understand completely where it's coming from. The ending is deeply satisfying in its sudden meta-fiction possibility, too.

Finally, from issue #237, 'Digital Rites' by Jim Hawkins. I had high expectations for this, having enjoyed 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter' so much last year, but I wasn't disappointed in the slightest. Enjoyable from the opening page, this story manages to be funny whilst delivering a thriller that raises interesting questions about the media, mocks the film-making industry somewhat, and manages to throw in a post-modern ending brave enough to remind the reader they've been taking part in something similar themselves. With a vast ensemble cast of characters, and action enough for a Bond film, I was sorry when Hawkins finally called "cut".

Needless to say, there were many other strong stories in these issues of *Interzone*, I've merely picked out a top five of favourites. I could also list 'Noam Chomsky and the Time Box' by Douglas Lain (#232), Jon Ingold's 'The Fall of the Silver City' (#236), and Lavie Tidhar's 'The Last Osama' (#237), for example, but a top eight doesn't have the same ring to it. And then I'd feel like adding others I enjoyed, like Chris Butler's 'Tell Me Everything' (#233) and Suzanne Palmer's 'The Ceiling is Sky' (#234).

Ah, looks like I've created a favourite ten again.

As for my favourite art, that would be Ben Baldwin's work for Nina Allan's 'The Silver Wind', and Paul Drummond's piece for (ahem!) my own story, 'Tethered to the Cold and Dying'. I might be a little biased there, but it was spot on for the story.

Peter Hollo

Interzone is still the only print magazine of short stories I subscribe to, and I actually read it as soon as I get it, so you must be doing something right!

This year, admittedly I didn't find as much that I'd consider superlative, although there's not a lot that I'd actually be willing to give a negative vote either.

I enjoyed Richard Wagner's

evocative artwork, but on the whole the juxtapositions felt a bit too disjointed. There was only one which I felt was entirely successful: 'Relics' for issue #234.

Duncan Lawrie

I must admit that I allowed the 2011 *Interzone* issues to collect on my "to be read" pile, rather than giving them close attention over the course of the year. It's not a mistake I will make this year. For my money, I think 2011 was the best year since TTA Press took on the magazine.

Particular highlights were: 'The Silver Wind' by Nina Allan (#233) – nailed the mood of her stories to a plot that could carry it. 'Sleepers' by Jon Ingold (#234) – a memorable character, interesting world building and an ending which recasts the whole story. 'The Ceiling is Sky' by Suzanne Palmer (#234) – a cracking marriage of setting and story. 'Of Dawn' by Al Robertson (#235) – intensity aligned with liminality and precise descriptions of place and time. 'The Metaphor' by Fiona Moore (#236) – the reflections between two voices make the ordinary extraordinary.

There were a number of challenging stories, which I'm not sure I've made up my mind about, such as Lavie Tidhar's 'The Last Osama' and Douglas Lain's 'Erasing the Concept of Sex From A Photobooth', both in #237, but the only story that I wouldn't give a "pass mark" to was 'Eleven Minutes' by Gareth L. Powell in #235, which felt uninvolved with an unearned twist ending.

I thought the covers were interesting and varied, with the second half of the year's run being slightly more to my taste – and Richard Wagner's artwork for 'A Time for Raven' being the highlight of the interior artwork as well. It's lovely to be back in colour throughout, too, which surprises me, as I've tended to think colour unnecessary in a story magazine. I guess we have just got used to every picture being in full colour these days. The opening spread particularly benefits from the use of colour.

I find all the review sections of interest, particularly where the lead book review is combined with an author interview. Nick Lowe is as perspicacious as ever and Tony Lee's sharp commentary provides a counterpoint. Still, I'd be happy with fewer DVD reviews from the horror/shocker end of the spectrum.

So, whilst I might not have read through the year with *Interzone*, it did leave me with quite a treat over the Christmas quiet time.

Doug Lee

I like the look and feel of the magazine.

Having very similar covers in consecutive issues can be confusing. I would vote for more diversity in cover art.

Chris Geeson

What really fascinated me this year were Mercurio D. Rivera's two stories set in the Wergen universe. 'Tethered' and 'For Love's Delirium Haunts the Fractured Mind' have had me reaching for my back issues to track down his previous stories. Another one that really caught my imagination was Fiona Moore's 'The Metaphor'. I'm hoping both authors will return to *Interzone* in the coming year.

J.C. Pavon

This year I found some stories to be rather bland, and most of them average, so let's see what's in store for the next six issues. I still believe I can have my mind wrung in the *Interzone*!

My favourite cover would be 'Babel II' by Richard Wagner. I'm not really into this style, I had a hard time looking at the covers of issues 232, 233, 234 and 235. I think Wagner sometimes is pretty good, as in 'Babel II', even if it's not my style, but those covers...

I think Warwick Fraser-Coombe's covers gave the magazine its best look ever, and I'm waiting for him to return to the magazine. I'll say my favourite illustrator right now is Mark Pexton.

Nick Lowe's column is still one of the reasons I have my subscription.

Overall, I find the book reviews omitting a lot of stuff I'm curious about, and giving too much space to fantasy titles that not even the reviewers find interesting.

J.B. Zeelie

Overall, another good year for *Interzone*. Admittedly, half of the 28 stories did nothing at all for me, but of the 14 that did 5 were really outstanding.

Richard Wagner is a terrific artist and all of his covers were superb, but '55 Bel Air' set the standard and kept its edge.

Keep going like this and you may win another Hugo.

Newer readers might want to download the free 'sampler' PDF from our website, which contains the 2011 poll-topping stories and artworks.

ELIZABETH BOURNE

BEASTS

MONSTERS CAROUSED THROUGH THE STREETS OF ARRAS.

MEN AND WOMEN IN RED VESTS
SHOUTED THE MARSEILLAISE AS
THEY BANGED ON DOORS. THEY
WERE JACOBINS, FOLLOWERS OF
ROBESPIERRE AND MARAT, DEMANDING
PROOF THE INHABITANTS WERE
GOOD REVOLUTIONARIES. GOOD
REVOLUTIONARIES LIVED, MOSTLY. BAD
REVOLUTIONARIES HAD THEIR HEADS
STUCK ON PIKES.



Inside a cramped house Nanon crossed her arms. "Papa, what were you thinking?" She stood by the hearth in a ragged red skirt. A furled revolutionary banner lay on the mantel. She stirred the soup pot. It contained a few withered beets and some grass.

In the corner an old man sat worrying at a branch he used as a cane. "Nanon, I knew your sister would like it." He whispered, "They killed Vauban, his whole family, for holding back food from the Commune. I saw them hanging from the trees. Even the little ones strung up like fruit. With things like that, who'll notice a single flower?" His voice shook.

Désirée worked to keep the crimson rose alive. A little boy, about three, peeked under her arm. He offered a cracked cup of water. The flower drooped as she placed it in the cup, bleeding viscous red sap from the stem.

"Nothing beautiful is ever free," Nanon said as she scratched a patch of eczema under her jaw. "You took a risk. They'll think us bourgeois, like Vauban, affording luxuries. Then what?"

Her father spread his empty hands. "No one will know it was me."

Désirée cried out: "It stuck me!" She sucked her finger.

"It's a rose. It has thorns," snapped Nanon. "The boys will be home soon. Des, set the table, will you? Papa, someone always knows. If you had to steal, couldn't you find an onion? Some turnips? We need food." Nanon grimaced as she tested the bitter soup.

"Risky?" said Désirée. "Whose fault is that, Nanon? You never even talked to us before you joined the mob, crying, 'Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!' Then you come home ruined and a traitor. You scorn papa for giving me a rose. What did you give us? Another mouth to feed."

"I believe in the revolution." Nanon glared at her fair sister. "Besides, the Jacobins are in charge. If I'd had the stomach for their methods, we'd be secure. They would've killed me if I'd been a man. I was just a girl. I paid the price for my mistake."

"So now at seventeen years you think you're wise?" Désirée's lip curled. "We may all pay the price. Even the little one. I'll give you a sou if Robespierre survives the year. Madame Guillotine, she's a hungry one."

A violent bang chopped off the old argument. The noise seemed too big for the tiny room. Nanon jumped. The child ran to hide his head in her skirts. She wondered if the Jacobins had remembered her.

Another attack on the door deafened them. Désirée huddled close to her father. The door handle rattled. Nanon thought about running. A woman alone might find a protector. She stamped on the thought. The Jacobins would kill everyone.

She had no choice. If they'd come for her, she must go. She might yet save her family – at least she'd go with honor, as a revolutionary. She called, "Just a moment, Citizen."

"Daughter, leave it shut."

"They'll break it down." Nanon grabbed the banner, a demonstration of loyalty. The door burst open.

In the entrance stood a servant in livery from a bygone age. He wore a gold-trimmed cape, gold knee breeches with silk stockings, and gloves of black velvet. No face lay beneath the tricorne hat, just darkness.

Désirée screamed. Nanon dropped the scarlet flag. The ap-

partition pointed at the wilted rose, then at each person in the room, as if questioning them. An answer was expected.

At first Nanon was grateful. It wasn't the Jacobins. "I took it," she said. The servant grabbed her. The child shrieked and tugged, opposing his small strength against the mysterious stranger.

For a second, Nanon froze. Then she imagined the endless string of nights here. All of them ground down by her mistake – if they survived. No one would speak for them. No one would dare. She had destroyed them.

Nanon repeated, "Me. I picked it. Papa, have Désirée marry François. He's powerful and he wants her. With me gone, the family's respectable."

"Daughter, what if you're killed?"

Her mind made up, Nanon grabbed a brown cloak. "We'd already be dead. I'll go. Who else?"

Désirée lifted her head. "I can go. I could've picked it."

The faceless servant gestured at Désirée, inviting her. She tumbled back. Nanon picked up the weeping child, quieting him. Then she said, "Des, you can't stand up to a bug. You'll marry. François will keep you safe. Look after Papa. That's all I ask."

"And petit Jean?" asked her father, "You'll take him? He's only three."

The little boy in Nanon's arms squirmed. Doubt flickered over her face. She hid her hesitation by kissing Jean's hand, then said, "I'm his mother. Where I go, he goes."

Her father stretched out his arms. "Leave him. I beg you. What if that thing harms him?"

Nanon jutted out her chin. "Just let him try."

The servant wavered. Nanon pushed forward. "Well? Will you take me, or do I stay and cook grass soup?"

He indicated a carriage. Its black crape festoons billowed in the wind like sails. Nanon halted, taking in her home. The revolution's banner, she wouldn't need that; her pretty sister, bound to marry well; her father, who meant no harm. She thought of her absent brothers, Pierre and Torcin.

"Tell the boys I love them." Tears dazzled her eyes. "And I love both of you." With Jean pressed close to her chest, she darted for the coach before they saw her cry.

Filthy maroon drapes covered the coach's windows. Nanon thrust them back, sneezing as she peered out. Jean curled against her. They passed knots of men, mere night shadows. No one noticed the massive carriage rumbling along the cobbled streets.

Hours passed, the stink and noise of the city was left behind. They came to a tall iron gate with gold acanthus leaves. It pivoted open. They entered a roadway thick with pine needles that smelled of camphor. A distant chateau bulked against the night sky. Twisted shrubs scraped the coach's sides. Nanon vowed she'd find the gate again, later.

When the coach finally stopped, more faceless servants hustled Nanon and Jean into the chateau where a fire burned in a stone fireplace decorated with lions. Nanon couldn't tell what kind of room they were in, only that the parquetry beneath her feet disappeared down a wide hall. She walked with Jean to wait by the fire. She tried to slow her breathing. No one had

hurt her. She'd wait for an explanation. That was logical.

A dark odor drifted into the room, something ancient and animal, a predatory stench. Jean began to cry anxious little hiccup tears. Nanon felt watched. Goosebumps rose on her arms. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Without thinking, she picked up the boy and ran.

She fled along dim passages, carrying Jean in her arms. Loud creaks, skittering noises, and distant slams alarmed her. Old places have odd noises, she whispered again and again, to soothe her nerves.

When she stepped on soft carpet, Nanon made her way to a corner, then sank into it. Jean's familiar warmth comforted her. Without intending to, she fell asleep.

Sunlight woke her. It poured in from the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the corridor. Nanon stretched. Leaving Jean dreaming with his thumb in his mouth, she went to look.

Fog hugged a swath of green lawn, softening the outlines of close-trimmed boxwood. Raked gravel paths curled out of view. Scattered seagulls sheltered on the grass, telling of a storm at sea.

Nanon marveled as she scratched her neck. She wore no glass slipper. She possessed no beauty, to be locked away as in a fable. But yes, it was real.

She sniffed. Someone was frying ham. She woke Jean, who'd wet his pants. The pungent odor hung in the corridor. As her long-empty stomach painfully clenched, she decided damp pantaloons could wait. She would find food.

Remembering the animal smell, Nanon edged her way along the halls, prepared to hide. When she found the dining room, she peeked in. It was empty.

Cherrywood panels lined the room. Above them hung frames covered in black felt, perhaps paintings protected against the sun. In the room's center stood a long oak table spotted with silver epergnes. At one end of the table waited a child's silver porringer, set with a child's silver spoon decorated with a hare. An adult setting had been laid at the far end.

Everything was still. Nanon sidled in. There were only the two place settings, yet the table held ham, smoked trout, eggs, porridge, bloody roast beef, spiced tripe, cold tongue in aspic. Her papa loved tongue. What he wouldn't give to eat cold tongue again. As she came to the table, Jean grabbed for the ham. A far door slammed and she jumped. No one came.

Nanon settled Jean in the high chair. This must be for them, why else have a child's setting? The little boy stared at the feast. She filled his bowl with porridge, then helped him spoon it. Nanon fed him bits of salty ham, making piggy noises so he laughed.

While he played with pieces of meat, she filled the remaining plate with eggs and beef and tongue. She brought it by Jean, watching the doors. She ate until her stomach hurt. A silver urn stood on a side table. It contained real coffee, not sludge made from acorns, and there was a jug with cow's milk.

When they had eaten all they could, Nanon looked around the room. Who had prepared the food? Where were they now? Who lived here? She spoke aloud: "Thank you for feeding us. I don't know why I'm here. Or for how long. I wish someone would tell me."

She went looking for a place to wash Jean. Rooms, some

open, some closed, led off the long passageways. None suitable for her needs. Occasionally one of the specters appeared, going about some business. Nanon hid until they were gone.

Stairs rose at the corridor's end. She took them. A new hall stretched out, lined with bedrooms. In one, someone had filled a bath. The warm water smelled of lilac. Nanon quickly locked the door. Now she'd wash Jean.

While Jean splashed in the water, Nanon spotted clothes laid out on the bed; an ancient dress and a little boy's outfit. She poked her fingers through moth holes. Insects had eaten the dress's lace. Their tiny husks nestled in the trim. The boy's wool culottes were crispy with age. Nanon kept on her old clothes, suspicious of the gift.

With her son's hand in hers, they snuck outside. Peacocks strutted on the lawn. Jean skipped after them. When they waved their fans of feathered eyes, he wobbled to a stop, calling for his mama to see the magic birds. Nanon smiled.

They searched for the gate. The far walls remained distant no matter how long Nanon walked toward them, first holding Jean's hand, then carrying the tired child until her arms ached.

Weeks passed. Tired of sleeping in closets and corners, Nanon moved herself and Jean into the bedroom with the bath. Nights, she locked the bedroom door.

Too often, the harsh animal smell followed her down the halls. Then they would hide, Nanon's heart thumping, until it was gone. Once, in the woods, she thought she saw a monster, enormous and red-furred, tracking her through the brush. After that, they kept to the gardens and left the woods alone.

A library inhabited the main floor turret. Bookshelves circled the round walls. In a desk Nanon found packs of cards. She taught Jean card games. Laugh and Lie Down, Alouette, and As Nas. Some days they played at revolution, overthrowing kingdoms. Jean threw himself into their games, conquering enemies and imaginary monsters. Nanon wondered if he missed his family in Arras at all.

Months passed. Hunting through the chateau one day, Nanon and Jean found the kitchen. It was an immense underground space with four sinks, a cutting table long as a man, six hearths, and rows of shining copper pots.

Nanon was pleased. She was proud of her cooking and the meals created by the staff – lark pie, cockatrice (a half pig-half chicken concoction) – were not to her taste. She claimed a space.

The larder was always stocked. Nanon took from it and prepared normal meals. Dandelion fritters, chicken fricassee, and once, a galantine. What bliss to have as much to eat as she pleased! Though sometimes she wept to think of her family still starving. She hoped that by now no one went hungry in the Republic.

Eventually a year went by. Jean grew and nothing bad happened. Nanon relaxed, allowing Jean to play alone. He developed an imaginary friend called the Hairy Man. The Hairy Man said that Grandpapa in Arras was fine and that Jean would always live in the chateau. The Hairy Man told fantastic stories of living roses, magic spells, and evil wizards. Nanon believed

the Hairy Man was a fantasy, born of their strange situation. But something in the messages rang true.

After two years, Jean turned five. Earlier that year Nanon had discovered a row of espaliered fruit. Now in September the apples were crisp and sweet and red as a heart. She told her son to play nearby, then made an apron of her blue wool skirt, dropping ripe apples into it. She'd make a tart.

Jean screamed. Being a curious boy, and small, he'd found a gate hidden in the shrubbery and slipped through it. He sat under roses tall as a horse. Scarlet blooms hung in scented masses, dropping petals on the monster crouched over him.

The beast had horns and yellow tusks. Ruddy fur covered his massive body. He wore dark pantaloons sewn to accommodate his backward animal-legs. The pantaloons weren't loose enough to hide his maleness. Nanon recognized his bestial stink as the odor that haunted her.

She screamed while pushing at the locked gate. She threw an apple. It struck the beast's ear. The monster turned. She hurled another. The creature galloped toward her on cloven hooves. At the barrier he reared up. Nanon yelled as she punched him.

Jean ran to his mother. She grabbed for her son, too slow! The beast snatched him. "Your child was digging my roses. I've fed you. Sheltered you. Let you use my things for your needs. Now you steal my fruit and attack me. You ungrateful peasant."

The apples dropped from Nanon's dress as she stepped back. The monster handed Jean over the gate's iron work. Nanon said, "I was going to make a pie."

"Pick them up," said the beast. "You might as well make it. They'll rot on the ground. I wouldn't hurt your boy. He can't dig up my roses. I'm fond of roses."

"They're beautiful."

"I know you admire them." The monster turned to go.

"Wait." He was uglier than any natural creature. Humped and tusked and scarred from combat. A talking monster was extraordinary magic. "You could've killed us. But you didn't. I'm grateful. Come eat with us. I can cook for three as well as two."

"I have servants." The beast scratched his ear with a hind foot. "I don't need you to cook."

"Even a beast can't enjoy lark's tongue pie."

Jean tugged at Nanon's sleeve. "Mama, is the Hairy Man angry?"

"No, dear. But you mustn't dig his roses."

The creature examined them with a yellow eye. "Thank you. I killed a deer. I'll send it to you."

"Then we'll have venison stew and apple tart." Nanon bent to pick up the scattered apples. Pushing aside the shrubs around it, the rose garden gate opened.

"Mama, we killed a boar. A big one, with tusks," Jean mimed with his hands, "this big. It's hanging in an oak, to ripen the meat. Le monsieur," the boy cast an adoring look at the beast chewing supper, "gave me the liver to eat. It was still bleeding, but I wasn't afraid."

Nanon went rigid. Then she forced herself to relax, forced the vision of her son, dead at seven, gutted by a wild boar, from her head. No, she couldn't force it away, merely suppress it. Nanon set down her soup spoon. "Did you spear the boar yourself, Jean?"

"No, le monsieur set me up in a tree. I watched." Then Jean forgot everything but dinner, attacking the sliced goose on his plate with relish.

The beast asked for the dish of oysters, gone cold by Nanon's place. She glared as she passed the bowl. His yellow eyes, deep under his brow, revealed nothing.

Eventually, something terrible would happen to Jean. The monster was fond of her son, she knew. But her benefactor wasn't human.

The years had misled Nanon; the peace of a full stomach, a bed, and no worrisome knock on the door. This place was like a dream. Now she must wake up to protect her son.

There might be a solution. Jean had nothing to do with the rose that brought her here. Surely he could go home. Nanon picked up her spoon. "Jean, what do you think of seeing your family in Arras? We can visit them. Your grandfather. Your aunt Désirée. Your uncles. Eh?"

Jean said, "Leave the chateau, mama?"

Setting down a goose leg, the beast said, "Jean can go. You, no."

"I've been here for four years," said Nanon, her voice quavering. She took a breath. "Cooking for you. Letting you teach my son to be an animal. He needs to know his family."

Jean's head swiveled between his mother and the beast.

"Madame, no one asked you to cook. No one asked you to bring the boy."

Nanon slammed her fist on the table, bouncing the gold plates and silverware. "He's my son."

The beast rose. "So I allowed it. Jean can go. I'll miss him –" he ruffled the boy's ash brown hair with his furry hand, the claws clicking together – but it's proper for the boy to know his family. You can never leave."

Servants cleared, replacing cold food with cheeses from the chateau dairy. Nanon grew dizzy. Her hand on the table appeared so very far away. She gasped. The room returned to focus.

The price of an enchanted rose was this prison sentence. Someday, she and Jean would go home together. Nanon would find work in a mill or cooking in a tavern. Jean would go to school. They'd travel, visit Calais, maybe Paris. She'd dreamed of these things. Now the trap's jaws had snapped shut.

Jean picked over the cheese plate. "Mama, I don't want to go alone."

Nanon roused herself and looked into his serious, freckled face. "A boy who can face a wild boar can meet his relatives. Stay for a week. You'll make new friends, you won't even miss me."

As the single week of Jean's absence expanded into two, then three, autumn grew further along. It was an education for Nanon to learn how she depended on her son. Her captivity pinched now she knew it was forever.

She visited the rose garden. Hay blanketed the side beds protecting the tender plants for winter. Leaf smoke spiced the air. A bench faced the tall rose bushes. She sat, head in hand, studying the plants.

One of these escaped the wall, enticing her papa. If she could reach the boundary, she could climb over. Nanon stepped into

the roses. Their thick stems, loaded with thorns, writhed to prevent her. They were as magic as the beast.

Nanon edged forward, biting her lip in anticipated pain. She thrust her arm into the plants. The stalks wrapped it. The heavy thorns dented her skin, but didn't puncture her. As soon as Nanon started to withdraw, the roses unwound with a rustling sound.

Rubbing her arm, Nanon walked beside the rose bushes. Although it was October, the blossoms continued in riotous colors. Yet they were not impervious. Her father had taken one. Nanon wondered what would happen if she picked some here, within the chateau. Would other people be collected? How did the magic work?

A garden shed sat close by the woods. Nanon took a pair of leather gloves, clippers, and a basket. The roses had limited mobility. They couldn't escape her vigor, although they tried. Nanon beheaded some of the prettiest blooms. As she placed them in her basket, she noticed sap bleeding red down the stalks. She reflected it must mean something even if she hadn't solved the puzzle.

Back in the chateau she located crystal vases. She filled them with water and roses. When she finished, the dining room brimmed with fragrance. A few late bees buzzed drunkenly among the bouquets. The velvet petals glowed against the wood paneling.

The beast wrenched open the French doors. "What have you done?"

Suddenly, Nanon was frightened. "I picked some flowers."

He slapped her. The blow threw her against the wall. Her head struck the paneling. The beast cried, "How dare you touch my roses? They're my life." He stood, fists clenched. His jaw worked. Saliva strung down to the floor.

Nanon's head spun. A tooth was loose. Blood bubbled from her mouth. Anxious servants collected in the doorway. The beast waved them off. Nanon inched toward a chair. When the monster didn't move to strike her again, she sat. The beast leaned over the roses. His shoulders shuddered from the strength of his sobs.

She touched her jaw. She might yet keep the tooth. Then she spat blood on the floor. Her fear became confusion. "Monsieur, I'm sorry. They're just roses. I felt lonely and wanted something to do."

The beast raised his tusked head. "What do you know of loneliness? Because I indulge you, what do you think, that we're equals? You ignorant peasant."

Nanon pushed herself up. Her head pounded. She'd have a goose egg tomorrow. Blood from her mouth smeared her hand. "I think, monsieur, that I am a woman and you are a beast. I think there are no more peasants. There are no more aristocrats. I'm sorry for the roses."

The beast took a knife and cut into his palm. He squeezed blood into each vase. The blood pooled into ruby spheres.

Nanon left the room. She felt angry and hurt and confused and didn't wish to see more.

The next morning the roses were still fresh. Nanon wondered why the rose her father picked died, and why the roses with the beast's blood lived. She suspected magic. But even magic should make sense. In which case, Nanon could understand

it. The Republic taught the world ran on logic. Nanon believed in logic.

During a cold rain, the black carriage brought Jean home. As they hugged, Nanon inhaled his smell. He'd been gone so long, she marveled that Jean still fit into the curve of her arms. When he pulled away, she saw that he had a black eye. He would not discuss it.

Leading Jean to the library, Nanon pressed for news. The boy licked his lips. Aunt Désirée married François known as the Butcher, now a Justice. Uncle Pierre was dead. GrandPapa died, too. Grief, or maybe his heart. Désirée's son François Pierre was in school. He could read and write. Jean had a girl-cousin Bibi Annette.

A cry escaped Nanon. Jean studied the patterns knotted within the crimson Turkey carpet. She asked for more.

Nanon owed her sister a sou. Robespierre was guillotined. A girl murdered Marat. The Jacobins were outlawed. A Directory ruled France now, in the Republican Year Six. They lived in the new Department of Nord-Pas-de-Calais. France had a real general, Napoleon.

Uncle Torcin joined Napoleon's army. He served in Egypt. France planned to conquer the world. Aunt Désirée had been to Paris. She wondered about Nanon's plans for her son? And why did Nanon never send them any word? Was Nanon happy having disappeared? It had been Désirée's rose, after all.

There was nothing more to say. Jean couldn't meet his mother's eyes. Arras wasn't his home. Perhaps it wasn't hers anymore either. But neither was the chateau. Jean left to unpack. In the empty library she dried her tears while she thought about the price of safety.

Her son was growing up ignorant, looking no further than the chateau's magic. Jean needed a broader world. The ormolu clock in the corner ticked off the minutes. She would never get them back. Nanon stood to hunt the beast.

She found him in the woods, skinning a roe. It hung from a hook through its hind legs, its tongue dangled from its mouth. The beast worked, disregarding the bloody pool he stood in.

Nanon sheltered under an oak with crimson leaves. She said, "Monsieur le beast, Jean cannot stay here." The beast was silent. Nanon wasn't sure he heard. She tried again. "His cousin can read. Jean is older by two years, and can't read or write."

The last of the roe's hide peeled free. The beast cut into its belly, releasing guts to the muddy ground. "I can teach him to read. My dogs, they loved viscera. Once, I had so many dogs. I had to kill them. Such a waste."

"Monsieur, you can read?"

The beast licked blood from his hand before answering. "Yes. Did you think I was always a monster? Where did you think all this –" he gestured to the forest, the formal gardens, the chateau – "came from? Where did you think I came from?"

Nanon held his yellow stare. "What I think doesn't matter. I'm forced to stay. My son doesn't need to."

"Every time I think well of you, madame, you disappoint me. Did you talk to Jean?" The beast returned to butchery. "In the village they called him a liar when he told the truth. A whore's son. You want that?"

Nanon argued. "I want him educated. He can be anything."

"Peace, madame. For Jean's sake, I know a place. I'll inquire."

"It may have been destroyed in the revolution. In four years, the world I knew is gone. Yours is surely dust. How long has your spell kept you imprisoned here?"

"This is my home. I was born here. The school is in Switzerland. They had no revolution. The Swiss are reliable. I can arrange it. I'd like sweetbreads tonight."

Blood splattered in Nanon's hair. She winced. "I don't like sweetbreads. The servants can do it."

The roe's limbs parted with a tearing sound. The beast said, "I prefer your cooking. Tonight Jean will get his first lesson."

Nanon's mouth was sour. This did not taste like victory.

Slowly, then with tick-tock regularity, Jean wrote from Switzerland. He wrote about mountains and Latin and arithmetic. He described his new friends and Geneva town.

He also wrote about the war. France invaded Geneva. Jean waved a French flag from his window. The soldiers waved back. Napoleon conquered the pyramids. Soon, France would invade England.

Like a beggar, Nanon asked the beast to read them aloud, over and over, until she had them by heart. In the rose garden, Nanon whispered the memorized letters as if the words would conjure her boy.

The beast ordered newspapers – *Le Courier de l'Europe*, *Le Journal de Paris* – to read in the library. Nanon tried to decipher the words. She couldn't. When the beast asked if she'd like him to read to her, Nanon replied she wasn't interested.

This was a lie. Once, she'd been a revolutionary. It was of great interest. But she wouldn't ask the monster. She took to gnawing her fingernails.

After a year of letters and papers, over evening brandy and while a game of *La Bête* rustled between them, Nanon asked the beast to teach her to read. She'd dressed in black velvet and put up her hair. She hoped she looked well. Half the afternoon she'd searched for a mirror. There were none to be found.

The beast crossed his pantalooned legs. "Education gives women the brain fever. Their brain cases –" he molded a brain in the air with his hands "– are too small, smaller than a man's. Impossible."

"Jean reads." Nanon tapped the cards, taking another trick. "His brain was smaller than mine. It's prejudice, monsieur. This is no longer whatever century you come from. In the modern age, women are educated, some write books."

"Foolishness. Might as well teach a horse to count. A parlor trick, no more." The beast snorted into a napkin, cleaning his snout.

"Give me a chance. It will pass the time."

The beast stood. "Wait here." On returning, he tossed a book to her. "This was my primer. See if you can puzzle through it."

Pictures decorated the red cover. Nanon said, "I'll learn. You'll see." She hurried away, eager to test her skill.

A black-gloved servant brought her extra candles, paper, and a pen. Nanon changed into a comfortable white muslin nightgown. She undid her hair, combing her fingers through the long strands.

Sitting at her vanity, she opened the primer. On the first page were pictures with letters above and words below. The picture

showed a man holding a book. Perhaps the writing described the illustration? She closed her eyes to visualize the words. Too hard. She tried to copy them. She made a scrawl of blots. She remembered the beast's elegant script and ground her teeth. She'd start with the large single "A." She tried again. And again.

The candles guttered. Nanon looked up. She'd been lost in the child's spelling book, trying to write a perfect "A." Ink creased her knuckles. Lighting a scone taper, Nanon went downstairs searching for fresh work candles.

The dining room blazed with candlelight. She peeked in. The beast stood in front of a mirror. Its black felt covering had tricked her into thinking it a hidden painting. Now, with the fabric bunched at his feet, the beast stared at his reflection.

Nanon walked behind him. The nightgown made her appear to float. She halted, surprised by her reflection.

When had her hair become so blonde? How had her eyes turned green? She didn't remember being beautiful. Nanon touched the scar from her eczema. She saw herself, yet not herself. The beast gave her time, holding his ugliness present in the mirror.

Remembering her original intent, Nanon said, "Monsieur, I can't make out the words in your book. Help me."

He said, "Look at me. I'm trapped in a beast's body. Alone. Why should I care, for you or for anything you want?"

Nanon said learning the words was harder than she'd thought. But with help, she'd learn quickly. Nanon was certain.

She was also certain he wasn't entirely a beast. Perhaps he was an unlucky magician. Or something else entirely. But his flesh was evident and she had something to bargain with. She trembled. He couldn't be worse than the men of Arras. She survived that.

Nanon untied her white gown. It fluttered to her ankles. Her mouth dry, she glanced at her pale nakedness. Yes, she would do. "How long has it been, monsieur? Or do you prefer to rut with animals?"

The beast took her on the table. It was not that bad.

A basket of fish waited outside the kitchen. It came from Calais. Nanon imagined the ship. White sails bellying out in the wind, waves soaping the deck. She'd make fish soup, with saffron.

A brown-speckled turbot stared from its seaweed wrapping. She checked its gills for pinkness, then grabbed a plump silver haddock. Orange roe lumped from its cloaca. Nanon flung it away. She dashed to a bush where she heaved out breakfast. Gasping and weeping Nanon wiped her mouth with her wrist.

The blunt clunk of hooves on cobbles announced the beast's approach. The monster's wide nostrils huffed as he sniffed the air. A drop of saliva fell on Nanon's arm. He asked, "How many months?"

Nanon wiped her arm. "Breakfast didn't agree with me."

The beast hauled Nanon to her feet. "Mint tea is being prepared to ease your stomach. We'll take it in the library. How many months?"

They walked down a wide passage lined with portraits of wiggled men and women to the library where a teapot painted with pink roses stood on a tray. Mint refreshed the room. Nanon sipped a cup to gain time. "Four months, I think. I didn't believe conception possible."

"If you thought me a monster, why lie with me?"

The minty steam eased her stomach. "Maybe you're a magician, ensorcelled by some greater wizard. Or a demon, trapped. I lay with you so you'd teach me. You know that. Why would I think we could make a child? How do I know a baby is what rests in me? It might be a monster, or a devil." Nanon fought her hysteria.

The beast contemplated her. "During the thirty years war, I offended a Spanish sorcerer. He wanted a marriage for his daughter Maria Rosalba Lozoya y Salar. He thought her my equal. Me, a descendant of Charlemagne. I thought her an animal. When she died, he cursed me for a beast. His curse binds everyone here. Even you."

"That was more than a hundred years ago," said Nanon. "You've been alone all this time? And your family?"

"The chateau is mine. I held the Carrency lands against the Spaniards. I keep them now. I'm the last Marquis de Carrency." He paused. "Unless you bear a living child."

Nanon placed her hands over her still-flat stomach. Maybe he wasn't a beast. She wasn't certain he was still a man. "What do you mean?"

The beast turned his tufted head to look at her. Before he spoke he chomped his tusks to clear his mouth, loosing saliva into a handkerchief. "My meaning is clear. If I'm capable of siring normal, living children, then my line is not dead. I may be cursed, but the family de Carrency continues. A way will be found to legitimize my sons." The beast, the Marquis de Carrency, rose. "My servants will tend you, madame. I would not have you come to harm. Drink your tea before it gets cold."

"How am I any better for your heirs than the girl, Rosalba?" Nanon asked.

The beast tugged loose a strand of Nanon's blonde hair. He pulled it. Nanon did not flinch. "You at least are French. Whatever else you are, I'm sure of that."

"And my lessons?"

The beast waved her question away. "If it contents you. My only concern is the fish in your belly."

Books surrounded Nanon. She set down her cup to walk along the shelves. There were documents about land management. Rabelais. She'd heard about him. Racine. Montaigne. Her fingers counted twenty-seven volumes of Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, multiple copies of de la Marck's *Botanical Dictionary* and *Natural History of Vegetables*. She would become accomplished.

Nanon sat again, sipping her cold tea. She might yet miscarry. The baby might be a monster. She might die. It happened to better women than her. The beast must promise to look after Jean. Her stomach soured. Desperate, she looked for a bucket. Instantly a servant brought her a porcelain chamber pot. For the first time, Nanon was grateful to a faceless retainer.

The library became Nanon's favorite place. She took her lessons there, and as her pregnancy advanced, became proficient. She adopted the desk that once held cards as her own *escritoire*. Now Nanon wrote to Jean herself, and treasured reading his letters.

The books were her companions. The beast hid Rabelais, which he said was inappropriate for a woman. She read Montaigne and Voltaire. She pored over the great *Encyclopedie*,

Diderot's masterpiece, absorbing philosophy, science, history, the theory of art, the science of politics. Everything a person needed to understand the world in twenty-seven volumes.

Mouse-chewed ledgers taught her arithmetic. She studied geometry as it applied to the Carrency lands, sectioned like oranges, sought and bought and fought over. On a page webbed with spider-writing one entry stood out.

Nanon called the beast to her. He leaned over, taking care for her size. The yellow linen wrapper poorly concealed her now voluminous belly.

"What," Nanon asked, "is this?"

"Nothing. Nothing important. I invested in La Salle's scheme for the new world empire. That gives me title to lands in the Americas. It might as well be the Moon. Madame, are you well?"

He was impossible. All those amazing events meant nothing to him, content to live among his roses. A pang wrenched her. Papers fluttered about her. Fluid drenched Nanon's skirts. "Monsieur, the infant comes."

Fear bloomed into agony. Nanon screamed as she fell to her knees. The beast went to assist her. Her face contorted, Nanon shrieked again. She grabbed the beast's hairy arm. The contact steadied her. She could breathe.

Quickly servants assisted her, draping cool sheets around her. One tried to pry Nanon's fingers from the beast's arm. It failed.

A stool was slipped under her buttocks, easing her back. Another round of contractions shattered Nanon. She yelled. The beast held water to her lips. She swallowed, her throat raw. He murmured something in Latin. Was it a prayer? It amused her then pain swept her under. Urine splattered into the pan beneath her. A violent contraction came and she bit her tongue as she shouted. Finally the baby left her in a sinuous flow, so strong it was almost sexual.

A wail filled the library. The beast passed Nanon a bloody bundle. With a sweaty finger, Nanon slicked wet hair from its forehead to meet a fierce amber gaze. Her breath caught. Such astonishing beauty.

"Madame," said the beast, "you have a daughter. She's fully human. Une bonne fille."

Nanon pushed her nipple toward the baby's rosebud lips. "Her name is Belle." The baby suckled greedily.

The beast lifted Nanon and Belle, navigating the stairs to Nanon's room, the sheets billowing behind them. He settled mother and child in bed. Servants waited with soft cloths and warm lavender water. Before leaving he said, "Madame, we can make perfect children. When you're recovered, we'll try for a son."

Belle toddled a few feet before falling over. Her diapered bottom bobbed as she hoisted herself up, then wobbled back to Nanon.

It had been a year since the birth. Nanon became lost in the miracle of Belle. She found peace in Belle's perfect scent, the copper silk of her hair, her soft peach-fuzz cheek. She felt happy. Then the beast would visit.

Belle would gurgle at her papa, waving her hands. He'd whisper things exclusively for Belle's perfect pink ears. Nanon's neck began to itch again.

In the spring rose garden, Nanon scratched absently at her

eczema while reading from de la Marck. With a finger holding her place on the page, she considered the blossomless rose stems, still barren from her picking.

Their roses still bloomed in vases with the beast's blood lying at the bottom. It made no sense. Or no sense in de la Marck's natural order. But there must be a reason.

She smelled the beast coming. He couldn't rid himself of that reminder of his nature. It remained a dangerous musk on the roseate air. The beast said, "Madame, I've been patient. Don't you think it's time we came together again?"

Nanon's face went hot. Her hand trembled as it went reflexively to her neck, rubbing the skin. What if her next child was a monster? What if she'd been merely lucky? "Belle still sleeps with me. She's just a baby."

"There's no need for your skin irritation. I can have a salve made."

Belle held out her arms and cried, "Papa, élevez, élevez, élevez," indicating her desire to be lifted into the air, and perhaps tossed. The beast complied. Belle had the illusion of being thrown while he never quite let go of her. She squealed with delight.

He returned Belle to the grass, giving her a doll made from animal skins. He addressed Nanon. "I admire your maternal instinct. What we need to do doesn't take all night. I've ordered a room prepared, close to yours. When we're done, you can return to our daughter."

Rage flooded Nanon. An emotion so strong, the day turned red to her. Then, like the beast, it was gone. When she looked down, she'd crushed several pages of her book. No pressing would fix them. She must get away.

Nanon knew all the rooms of the chateau, and as much of the gardens as could be known. That left the forest. She wrote Jean asking what he recalled from his childhood, hoping for a clue.

Weeks later, Jean responded. In among paragraphs of astronomy lessons and adventures with his friends Luc and Hercule, he recalled Arcadia.

He remembered a mossy place where a stream began. It was secret. Le monsieur said every boy should have a secret hideaway. A vast white rose grew there, cascading flowers. Monsieur didn't allow him near it. Nothing approached the rose, not even bees.

Would she please send a new winter jacket? And mittens. But not yellow this time. Please thank le Monsieur for the book of Telemachus.

Nanon took Belle for walks in the forest, saying it was because Belle loved the woods. Belle did love trees, hugging them as if they were old friends. A brook wandered between the oaks and beeches. They sailed boats made from Nanon's journal pages. Nanon wished they could follow their paper vessels to a safe harbor.

Once, they encountered a slaughtered hare with its parts scattered. Belle discovered the head caught in a shrub. Curious, she squatted by it, studying its empty face. At first Nanon didn't notice. When she saw Belle reach a finger to the bloody nose, she screamed. Later, Nanon wondered why. A dead hare was no threat. But in the moment, she snatched Belle away.

After Nanon tucked the child in bed, she found the beast waiting. She walked with him to the room they used for the

purpose of getting a son. As the beast unfastened her clothing, Nanon mentioned the dead rabbit.

He said, "Perhaps you shouldn't wander the woods. Winter is coming."

Nanon bent to remove her shoes, asking if the rabbit was a warning.

The large bed creaked as the beast sat. "You have the gardens to amuse you. The chateau is large and you have possession of that. The woods are mine."

"Why did you do it?" Nanon sat by the beast. He looked vicious, yet she wasn't afraid. Not anymore.

He pushed her down on the bed, tightening his grip on her wrists. "What life do I have? I bed a woman who finds little joy in me. My servants are turned to vacant creatures. Even my nurse, who suckled me and cared for me is faceless. My friends are dead. The whole world is mad. If a hare suffers for my anger, what is it to you? In the woods I can be the monster I am."

He fell upon Nanon. While they struggled together, Nanon thought about all the masses of roses he protected and none of them white. But winter would soon hold them in its cold hand and she'd do as he asked. He could have his woods. For now.

In the spring, Nanon found herself pregnant again. She cut her arm hoping that one kind of blood on her menstrual rags was much like another. Maybe the beast couldn't tell.

Desperate to understand the magic, Nanon counted the servants. Belle played games in the rose garden while Nanon drew tables in her journal. As she suspected, every servant had a rose.

The plants blossomed in coral, pink, and red. Far in back, she spotted the dried husk of a dead rose supported by living plants. She wondered if this was the fated bush her father cut. She couldn't reach it. The roses blocked her passage. Now they tore her skin and threatened to gouge her eyes.

Nanon cried out, her arms bleeding. Belle charged into the roses. The plants drew back. They wouldn't harm Belle. The discovery shook Nanon more than her injuries. A daughter made her replaceable.

After binding her arms, Nanon returned to the library where she made lists. Roses and servants. The beast was immortal. He'd killed a woman before. Who was Rosalba? Somewhere there grew a white rose.

A rhythmic tocking distracted her. At one of the few edges in the curved room, Belle sat splay-legged on the floor, her animal skin doll beside her. She stared intently at the bookcase. Belle's chubby fingers grasped the upright corner of the carved wood. She pulled a small, hidden door open, tock, then silently closed it.

Nanon crouched beside her. Belle pointed to the narrow opening, explaining her dolly wouldn't fit. Nanon peered inside. Sheets of vellum, crinkled from Belle's efforts, stood within the cavity. Nanon removed them. When she closed the casing, it merged into the bookcase's decorative molding.

The sheets were brittle. They weren't written in the beast's hand. One was an incomplete certificate of marriage. Nanon set it aside. The other was a letter, difficult to parse. While Belle hummed, walking her doll along the shelves, Nanon deciphered the letter. She trembled at what she held.

Señor,

I am told my daughter is dead. Her body lies in the woods. Like immortal Daphne, she will live on, your lives bound. I give you the form she described. A monster. My daughter was nothing to your servants, they will be nothing to you. You will never change. The count of lives must never change, or you all will die. You are an ant stuck in amber of my making. I curse you, monster. The white rose is your blood. Remember my Rosalba every day, arrogant beast. I am punished for believing you deserved my child.

Nanon returned the papers to the secret space. She checked the room, making sure it looked the same. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Nanon wrestled to control her stomach. She would not be ill now. Belle watched round-eyed, holding her doll to her small chest.

It was time to search the woods, no matter what the Beast said. She had to, for Belle. She would put her fear aside.

In late summer Nanon and Belle stood atop a brushy hill. At the bottom lay a glade. Water trickled through it. She couldn't bring Belle down such a rough slope.

Collecting acorn cups, Nanon advised Belle to give her doll a tea party under the oaks. Then she tore strips from her underskirt, using the fabric to leash Belle to a tree. She ordered Belle to stay where she was, uncertain Belle even heard her in her new game.

Nanon stumbled down the rocky hillside. In the middle of the glade towered a white rose. The trunk was as thick as her arm. White roses fountained to the ground. Petals lay like snow. It must be Rosalba.

In a rocky niche hid a collection of treasures. The paper boats she and Belle had sailed. A toy soldier Jean had carved. Her first writing samples. She touched the objects with wonder. One of Jean's baby teeth. A lock of her hair. What did they mean?

At the far end a deeply rutted path led into the clearing. It must be how the beast visited. With care, Nanon struggled back to where Belle fed empty acorn cups of tea to an unresisting dolly.

For dinner that night she roasted a saddle of veal. She included blanched asparagus. An oyster stew. Sweetbreads, which she knew the beast loved. She even made a pudding in the English style. The beast's yellow eyes remained a mystery. He said nothing.

The next morning Nanon rose early, in the dark. She carried Belle out of the sleeping chateau. Fog curled over the green lawn, softening the outlines of close-trimmed boxwood. Raked gravel paths led her toward the woods, the mist unraveling at her feet.

Shushing Belle, Nanon settled her with her dolly into a blanket. Then Nanon collected hay prepared for wintering the gardens. She banked the dried stuff throughout the length of the rose bed. It took many trips to pile it several feet thick about the roses. The stars were dimming as she finished. Nanon's sweat hung heavy in the air as the first delicate rose scent coiled from the flowers.

Nanon put a hand to the flint set in her pocket, then crossed herself, a gesture she hadn't made since childhood. If what she thought was true, she would commit a terrible crime. Had the faceless servants ever hurt her? Nanon looked up at the bright-

ening sky. It didn't matter.

She lit the hay. The flames licked along the rose bed, then whooshed up. Nanon staggered back, flinging an arm over her face. The fire grew, a terrible thing. Smoke blotted the pale blue sky. The plants curled in the heat, roses blackened to sticks. The smell of cooked meat drifted up with cinders.

Grabbing Belle, Nanon hastened to the woods. She stopped at the tool shed on the forest's edge to collect an axe. Belle cried for breakfast. Nanon hurried across the grassy verge to the path through the trees. She promised Belle a treat, later, if Belle could be quiet. Belle couldn't.

Fear made Nanon squeeze the child's arm, which caused Belle to cry harder. Nanon ran along the narrow track. He would know. He would come after her.

Finally, she reached the glade. In tears herself, she sat on a stone and rocked Belle. Ash stained her hands. Nanon scrubbed at it, smearing the mess.

Shuddering, Nanon fought to calm herself. She couldn't think about what she'd done. Belle asked for her doll, forgotten in the rose garden. Nanon wiped Belle's tears, marking Belle with ash.

A wild grape trailed from an oak. Nanon swallowed and said that they would eat grapes for breakfast. Belle followed her mother's shaking finger and agreed. It could be a fable, mama and Belle eating grapes in the woods. Belle happily took the grapes, then sat like a queen at the glade's edge.

In the center, the white rose gleamed. It didn't quake at Nanon's approach or seek to entwine her. Nanon wondered if this would be a release for Rosalba, cursed to be part of a man she hated. She hoped it would. Nanon struck the rose with her axe. The trunk shivered, bleeding.

The beast stepped out from the deep shadows, sniffing the air. Terrified, Nanon waited for him to spring and tear her apart. As the beast approached she struck the rose wildly, in panic.

He didn't attack. Instead he spread out his arms, showing his empty hands. With a mournful voice he said, "Madame, stop, I beg you. You've murdered my servants. Innocent cooks, footmen, gardeners. Now you come to destroy me. Why shouldn't I kill you here, and take my daughter back to the chateau?" He stumbled as the rose weakened.

Her knees faint with dread, Nanon said, "I expect you to kill me. You're a monster."

His yellow eyes seemed to glow. "Is that truly how you see me? Yet you've been a wife to me. You're the mother of my child. Madame, for our child's sake, give this up."

"I'm pregnant. What if I have a son? Will he mate with Belle? What happens when I become old? Will you lie with your daughter like Lot in the Bible? What a race of monsters you'll breed then, eh? That Spaniard cursed you better than he knew."

Nanon swallowed. "I'm only free if you are dead. With the roses gone, I can take Belle away. Outside is a new world. Here lies only dust and old magic."

Almost to her, the beast's breathing came ragged from his mighty chest. His smell filled the glade. Nanon didn't falter. She would be strong.

The beast put a hand to his face. "How can you think so poorly of me? I care for you. I care for Belle. Your world has monsters far worse than me. I would not choose to live there. I pity those who do." He reached for Nanon.

Fearing for Belle, for herself, for her unborn child, Nanon screamed at him to keep away. She struck at the towering white rose with all her strength. First, the rose shook, then the massive plant fell. The beast collapsed beside it. He cried out.

Nanon dropped the axe and ran to him. Blood from the rose flecked his fur. Nanon called Belle to come kiss her papa. Uncertain, Belle offered the beast an acorn cup. Nanon put one of the beast's arms around Belle and the other hand on her stomach. She said, "Monsieur, you die among your family."

The beast groaned. "My name is Aldric."

Nanon caressed his rough hair while the light in his yellow eyes faded. His massive body lay heavy against her. Nanon sobbed. She hadn't expected this pain. She didn't know for how long she wept. When she looked up, Belle was sticking oak leaves into the beast's fur as she hummed. Shocked, Nanon collected her daughter. They must go. There was much to be done.

Smoke greased the lawns and pathways. Belle wished to fetch her animal skin doll. Nanon couldn't bear to enter the garden and see the blackened rose corpses.

Their footsteps sounded hollow through the chateau's corridors. Already the house appeared faded. In the dining room, several servants, the exact number of roses in the crystal vases, milled about.

They were human. Men and two women, one elderly and one young. A man detached himself from the group.

"I'm Pierre, the third footman. What's happened?"

Nanon sat. Numbness overcame her. She could do no less than tell the truth. "Your master is dead. I've committed a terrible crime. But you, you're free because of his blood in your roses. Belle and I are leaving. If you love the marquis, retrieve his body from the woods and place him in one of the family crypts." She covered her face for a moment. "You'll know better than I what's proper. You're free to go. Free to stay."

Pierre frowned. An expression seemed foreign to him after the faceless years. "Will we live if our roses are taken from the vases?"

Nanon shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so. I believe you depend upon the beast – my apologies, your master – for your lives, as he depended upon the white rose. I destroyed Rosalba."

Pierre grabbed a rose, his look asking if the others objected. The servants nodded. He tossed it to the table. As the rose bled out and paled, the old woman smiled. She said it didn't hurt, then slumped to the floor, dead.

Pierre said, "Very well. We'll bury the marquis with his white rose. Some of us have no wish to live in this lawless world, without a king. We'll go with him."

Nanon waved them off. She'd seen so much death today. What did it matter?

The young woman touched her sleeve. "Madame? Please? Jules and I were going to be married. We wish to have our lives. Can you help us? My name is Sylvie."

The young man looked strong. He could carry the boxes of plate she'd need to finance her trip. Sylvie could help with Belle. It wasn't a bad idea. Nanon said, "Prick the stems with a pin. If it hurts you, I suspect that's your rose. Move them and some blood to another vase. We'll keep them safe."

Jules said, "Madame, will the magic work outside the castle?"

Their faces were so open. Nanon wondered if she'd ever been that young. Perhaps the revolution had eaten her innocence, then spit this hard thing out. Perhaps that was good. "I don't know. You must decide. Come with me, or stay here."

Seeing their fear, Nanon stood. "I'll take care of your roses. When I'm done, Sylvie, feed Belle, then pack our things. Jules, collect all the gold you can find and as much silver plate as we can carry. When you're finished, I'll be in the library. I have papers to arrange. Jules, you can handle horses and a carriage, yes? Tonight I want to sleep in Arras."

They were a few weeks out from Calais, one of the last Atlantic passages before winter. The blue, white, and red French flag snapped in the breeze, sounding like a gunshot. It pleased Nanon that the revolution's red remained planted in the new tricolor.

Earlier Jean said that he understood her marrying Monsieur le Beast. It was their secret. Others would not understand the beast was a good man underneath his fur and tusks. Nanon wished she could tell Jean everything. But that wouldn't be sensible.

Jean held his sister's hand as they hunted the sea for mermaids. It made the captain nervous, with British warships about, to have passengers outside, particularly a lovely woman. Regardless of the Emperor's confidence in France's imperial mandate, the captain had due regard for the enemy's navy.

Under orders, a ship's officer approached. "Madame, in your condition, wouldn't you prefer your cabin?"

Resting a hand on her bulging stomach, Nanon said, "My late husband, le Marquis de Carrency, believed in the virtue of fresh air."

The officer grimaced. The woman did not take a hint. Aristocrats never did. He wondered aloud what to tell his captain. Nanon pitied him. She started for her cabin, then stopped. "I'll need a lawyer when we arrive in this New Orleans. I have a land deed that needs proving. Can you recommend someone?"

The officer stroked his moustache. "Perhaps, Madame Marquise. But there are those who will take advantage of a woman alone."

Nanon's voice darkened as she replied. "Let them try, sir. Let them try." She continued on to her suite, directing Jean to watch his sister.

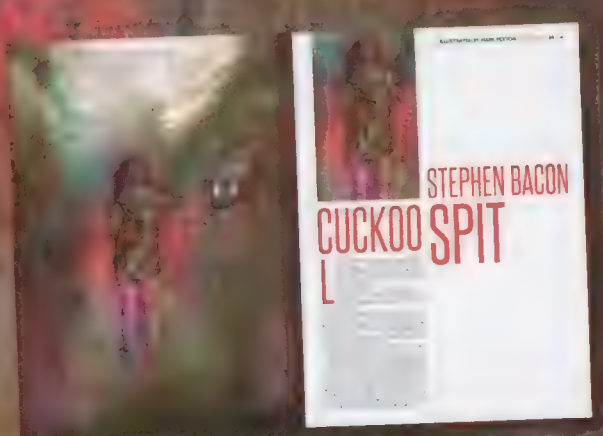
In the cabin Sylvie was ironing. Nanon smiled at her before sitting at the tiny dresser. The mirror displayed Nanon's wind-blown blonde hair. Her hand, weighed by an antique gold ring, touched the scar on her neck. The salve Sylvie had made cured her eczema.

In the glass she saw, protected against any sway of wave, a sturdy vase. It contained three roses: Sylvie's pink bud, Jules' salmon bloom, and the beast's (Aldric, Nanon reminded herself) tattered white rose. It was recovering well.

Elizabeth Bourne has previously published short fiction in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Black Lantern*. Currently, she is working on a trilogy of novels set in ancient Alexandria and a mystery set in 1920s San Francisco. Recently widowed, Elizabeth currently lives in Seattle where trolls do, in fact, live under bridges. She is advised on her writing by her dog, Kai, who eats the bad pages.

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THE SMELL OF RAIN CAUGHT THEM UNPREPARED.

It was spring, there was that smell of jasmine and it mixed with the hum of electric buses and there were solar gliders in the sky, like flocks of birds. Ameliah Ko was doing a Kwasa-Kwasa remix of a Susan Wong cover of 'Do You Wanna Dance'. It had begun to rain in silver sheets, almost silently; the rain swallowed the sound of gunshots and it drenched the burning buggie down the street, and the old homeless guy taking a shit by the dumpster, with his grey pants around his ankles, got caught in it, his one roll of toilet paper in his hand, and he cursed, but quietly. He was used to the indignity of rain.

LAVIE TIDHAR

THE INDIGNITY OF RAIN



The city had been called Tel Aviv. Central Station rose high into the atmosphere in the south of the city, bordered in by the webwork of silenced old highways. Central Station was shaped like an hour-glass; its roof rose too high to see, serving the stratospheric vehicles that rose from and landed on its machine-smooth surface. Elevators like bullets shot up and down the station and, down below, in the fierce Mediterranean sun around the space port, a bustling market heaved with commerce, visitors and the resident pick-pockets and identity thieves.

From orbit down to Central Station, from Central Station down to street level, and out from within the air-conditioned artificial space into the poverty of the neighbourhood around the port, where Mama Jones and the boy they called Kranki stood hand in hand.

The rain caught them by surprise. The space port, this great white Central Station, like a mountain rising out of the urban bedrock, drew onto itself the formation of clouds, its very own miniature weather system. Like islands in the ocean spaceports saw localised rains, cloudy skies, and a growth industry of mini-farms taking advantage of the near-tropical rain.

The rain was warm and the drops fat and the boy reached out his hand and cupped a raindrop between his fingers.

Mama Jones, who had been born in Israel, in this city they had called Tel Aviv, almost a century before, to a Nigerian father and a Filipina mother, in this very same neighbourhood, when the roads still thrummed to the sound of the internal combustion engine and the central station had served buses, not RLVs, and could remember wars, and poverty, and being unwanted here, in this land fought over by Arab and Jew, looked at the boy with fierce protective pride. A thin, glittering membrane, like a soap bubble, appeared between his fingers, the boy secreting power and manipulating atoms to form this thing, this protective snow globe, capturing within it the single drop of rain. It hovered between his fingers, perfect and timeless.

Mama Jones waited, if a little impatiently. She ran a shebeen here, on the old Neve Sha'anán road, a pedestrianised zone from the old days that ran right up to the side of the space port, and she needed to be back there.

"Let it go," she said, a little sadly. The boy turned deep blue eyes on her, a perfect blue that had been patented some decades earlier before finding its way to the gene clinics here, where it had been ripped, hacked and re-sold to the poor for a fraction of the cost.

They said south Tel Aviv had better clinics even than Chiba or Yunnan, though Mama Jones rather doubted it.

Cheaper, though, maybe.

"Is he coming?" the boy said.

"I don't know," Mama Jones said. "Maybe. Maybe today he is coming."

The boy turned his head to her, and smiled. He looked very young when he smiled. He released the strange bubble in his hand and it floated upwards, through the rain, the single suspended raindrop inside rising towards the clouds that gave it birth.

Mama Jones sighed, and cast a worried glance at the boy. Kranki was not a name, as such. It was a word from Asteroid

Pidgin, itself a product of Earth's old South Pacific contact languages, carried into space by the miners and engineers sent there as cheap labour by the Malay and Chinese companies. *Kranki*, from the old English *cranky*, it meant variously grumpy or crazy or...

Or a little odd.

Someone who did things that other people didn't.

What they called, in Asteroid Pidgin, *nakaimas*. Black magic.

She was worried about Kranki.

"Is he coming? Is that him?"

There was a man coming towards them, a tall man with an aug behind his ear, and skin that showed the sort of tan one got from machines, and the uneasy steps of someone not used to this gravity. The boy pulled on her hand. "Is that him?"

"Maybe," she said, feeling the hopelessness of the situation as she did each time they repeated this little ritual, every Friday before the Shabbat entered, when the last load of disembarking passengers arrived at Tel Aviv from Lunar Port, or Tong Yun on Mars, or from the Belt, or from one of the other Earth cities like Newer Delhi or Amsterdam or São Paulo. Each week, because the boy's mother had told him, before she died, that his father would one day return, that his father was rich and was working far away, in space, and that one day he would return, return on a Friday so as not to be late for the Shabbat, and he would look after them.

Then she went and overdosed on Crucifixion, ascending to heaven on a blaze of white light, seeing God while they tried to pump her stomach but it was too late, and Mama Jones, somewhat reluctantly, had to look after the boy – because there was no one else.

In North Tel Aviv the Jews lived in their sky-rises, and in Jaffa to the South the Arabs had reclaimed their land. Here, in between, there were still those people of the land they had called Israel whose ancestors had come there as labourers from around the world, from the islands of the Philippines, and the Sudan, from Nigeria, and Thailand and China, whose children were born there, and their children's children, speaking Hebrew and Arabic and Asteroid Pidgin, that near universal language of space. Mama Jones looked after the boy because there was no one else and the rule across this country was the same in whichever enclave of it you were. *We look after our own.*

Because there is no one else.

"It's him!" The boy pulled at her hand. The man was coming towards them, something familiar about his walk, his face, suddenly confusing Mama Jones, since could the boy really be right? But it was impossible, the boy wasn't –

"Kranki, stop!" The boy, pulling her by the hand, was running towards the man, who stopped, startled, seeing this boy and this woman bearing down on him. Kranki stopped before the man, breathing heavily. "Are you my daddy?" he said.

"Kranki!" said Mama Jones.

The man went very still. He squatted down, to be level with the boy, and looked at him with a serious, intent expression.

"It's possible," he said. "I know that blue. It was popular three decades ago. We hacked an open source version out of the trademarked Armani code..." He looked at the boy, then tapped the aug behind his ear – a Martian aug, Mama Jones noticed with alarm.

There had been life on Mars, not the ancient civilizations dreamed of in the past, but a dead, microscopic life. Then someone found a way to resequencer the genetic code, and made augmented units out of it...

Symbionts no one understood, and few wanted to.

The boy froze, then smiled, and his smile was beatific. He beamed. "Stop it!" Mama Jones said. She shook the man until he almost lost his balance. "Stop it! What are you doing to him?"

"I'm..." The man shook his head. He tapped the aug and the boy unfroze, and looked around him, bewildered, as though he was suddenly lost. "You had no parents," the man told him. "You were labbed, right here, hacked together out of public property genomes and bits of black market nodes." He breathed. "*Nakaimas*," he said, and took a step back.

"Stop it!" Mama Jones said again, feeling helpless. "He is not -"

"I know." The man had found his calm again. "I am sorry. He can speak to my aug. Without an interface. I must have done a better job than I thought, back then."

Something about the face, the voice, and suddenly she felt weak-kneed. "Boris?" she said. "Boris Chong?"

"What?" He raised his face, looking at her properly for the first time. She could see him so clearly now, the harsh Slavic features and the Chinese eyes, the whole assemblage of him, older now, changed by space and circumstances, but still him.

"Miriam?"

She had been Miriam Jones, then. Miriam after her grandmother. She tried to smile, couldn't. "It's me," she said.

"But you -"

"I never left," she said. "You did."

The boy looked between them. Realisation, followed by disappointment, made his face crumble. Above his head the rain gathered, pulled out of the air, forming into a wavering sheet of water through which the sun broke into tiny rainbows.

"I have to go," Miriam said. It'd been a long time since she'd been Miriam to anybody.

"Where? Wait -" Boris Chong looked, for once, confused.

"Why did you come back?" she said.

He shrugged. Behind his ear the Martian aug pulsed, a parasitic, living thing feeding off its host. "I..."

"I have to go." Mama Jones, Miriam, she had been a Miriam and that part of her, long buried, was awakening inside her, and it made her feel strange, and uncomfortable, and she tugged on the boy's hand and the shimmering sheet of water above his head burst, falling down on either side of him, forming a perfect, wet circle on the pavement.

Every week she had acquiesced to the boy's mute desire, had taken him to the space port, to this gleaming monster in the heart of the city, to watch and to wait. The boy knew he had been labbed, knew no woman's womb had ever held him, that he had been birthed within the cheap labs where the paint peeled off the walls and the artificial wombs often malfunctioned - but there had been a market for disused foetuses too, there was a market for anything.

But like all children, he never *believed*. In his mind his mother really *had* gone up to heaven, Crucifixion her key to the gates, and in his mind his father would come back, just the way

she'd told him, descend down from the heavens of Central Station and come down, to this neighbourhood, stuck uncomfortably between North and South, Jew and Arab, and find him, and offer him love.

She pulled on Kranki's hand again and he came with her, and the wind like a scarf wound itself around him, and she knew what he was thinking.

Next week, perhaps, he would come.

"Miriam, wait!"

Boris Chong, who had once been beautiful, when she was beautiful, when in the soft nights of spring they lay on top of the old building filled with domestic workers for the rich of the North, they had made themselves a nest there, between the solar panels and the wind traps, a little haven made of old discarded sofas and an awning of colourful material from India with political slogans on it in a language neither of them spoke. They had lain there, and gloried in their naked bodies up there on the roof, in spring, when the air was warm and scented with the lilacs and the bushes of jasmine down below, late-blooming jasmine, that released its smell at night, under the stars and the lights of the space port.

She kept going, it was only a short walk to her shebeen, the boy came with her, and this man, a stranger now, who had once been young and beautiful, whispering to her in Hebrew his love, only to leave her, long ago, it was so long ago -

This man was following her, this man she no longer knew, and her heart beat fast inside her, her old, flesh heart, which had never been replaced. Still she marched on, passing fruit and vegetable stalls, the gene clinics, upload centres selling second-hand dreams, shoe shops (for people will always need shoes on their feet), the free clinic, a Sudanese restaurant, the rubbish bins, and finally she arrived at Mama Jones' Shebeen, a hole-in-the-wall nestled between an upholsterer's and a Church of Robot node, for people always need old sofas and armchairs re-upholstered, and they always need faith, of whatever sort.

And drink, Miriam Jones thought as she entered the establishment, where the light was suitably dim, the tables made of wood, with cloth over each, and where the local node would have broadcast out a selection of programming feeds had it not been stuck, some time back, on a South Sudanese channel showing a mixture of holy sermons, weather reports that never changed, and dubbed re-runs of the long-running Martian soap *Chains of Assembly*.

A raised bar, offering Palestinian Taiba beer and Israeli Macabee on tap, locally-made Russian vodka, a selection of soft drinks and bottled beer, sheesha pipes for the customers and backgammon boards for use of same - it was a decent little place, it did not make much but it covered rent and food and looking after the boy, and she was proud of it.

A few regulars sitting inside, Suri and Jot, dock-yard workers off-shift from the space port sharing a sheesha and drinking beer, chatting amiably, a tentacle-junkie flopping in a bucket of water, drinking *arak*, and Miriam's friend, Shelly Goldblum-Watts, a Jew, who worked at one of the nearby gene clinics: she wore a sarong and dark glasses and chunky jewellery and her hair was a bright red that morning.

Murmurs of greetings as she came in, her assistant, also cook, also cleaner and washer, Isaiah Wu, behind the counter,

wiping a glass with a cloth, looking less anxious as always now that she was back.

"Take a break," she said, and he grinned, flashing white teeth in a tanned face, and disappeared out the back, cheerfully pulling out the rolled cigarette that had nestled behind his ear, waiting for that moment.

"Kranki," Mama Jones said, "I think you should go up to the flat and do your school work."

"Finished," the boy said. He had turned his attention to the sheesha pipe nearby and had cupped blue smoke in his hand, turning it into a smooth round ball. He seemed fascinated with it. Mama Jones, now standing behind her counter and feeling a lot more at ease, here, queen of her domain, heard the footsteps and saw the shadow pass and then the tall thin frame of the man she last knew as Boris Chong come in, bending under the too-low door.

"Miriam, can we talk?"

"What would you have?"

She gestured at the shelves behind her. Boris Chong's pupils dilated, and it made a shiver pass down Mama Jones' spine. He was communicating, silently, with his alien aug.

"Well?" Her tone was sharper than she had intended.

Boris' eyes opened wider. He looked startled. "An arak," he said, and suddenly smiled, the smile transforming his face, making him younger, making him –

More human, she decided.

She nodded and pulled a bottle from its shelf and poured him a glass of arak, that anis drink so beloved here, and added ice, and brought it to him to a table, with chilled water to go beside it – when you poured the water in the drink changed colour, the clear liquid becoming murky and pale like milk. She brushed Shelly as she passed and her friend grinned up at her with knowing, unsettling eyes. Miriam could not remember if Shelly had known Boris, but they were in the same trade, it was not impossible.

"Sit with me."

She stood, with her hands crossed over her chest, then relented. She sat down and he, after a moment's hesitation, sat down also.

"Well?" she said.

"How have you been?" he said.

"Well."

"You know I had to leave. There was no work here any more, no future –"

"I was here."

"Yes."

Her eyes softened. She knew what he meant, of course. Nor could she blame him. She had encouraged him to go and, once he was gone, there was nothing to it but for both of them to move on with life, and she, on the whole, did not regret the life she'd led.

"You own this place?"

"It pays the rent, the bills. I look after the boy."

"He is..."

She shrugged. "From the labs," she said. "It could be he was one of yours, like you said."

"There were so many..." he said. "Hacked together of whatever non-proprietary genetic code we could get our hands on.

Are they all like him?"

Miriam shook her head. "I don't know... It's hard to keep track of all the kids. They don't stay kids, either. Not forever." She called out to the boy. "Kranki, bring me a drink."

The boy turned, his serious eyes trained on them both, the ball of smoke still in his hand. He tossed it in the air and it assumed its regular properties and dispersed.

"Now, Kranki," Miriam said. The boy went to the bar and Miriam turned back to Boris.

"Where have you been all this time?" she said.

He shrugged. "Spent some time on Ceres, in the Belt, working for one of the Malay companies." He smiled. "No more babies. Just...fixing people. Then I did three years at Tong Yun, picked up this –" He gestured at the pulsating mass of bio-matter behind his ear.

Miriam said, curious, "Did it hurt?"

"It grows with you," Boris said. "The...the seed of the thing is injected, it sits under the skin, then it starts to grow. It...can be uncomfortable. Not the physicality of it but when you start to communicate, to lay down a network."

It made Miriam feel strange, seeing it. "Can I touch it?" she said, surprising herself. Boris looked very self-conscious; he always did, she thought, and a fierce ray of pride, of affection, went through her, startling her.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead."

She reached out, touched it, gingerly, with the tip of one finger. It felt like skin, she thought, surprised. Slightly warmer, perhaps. She pressed, it was like touching a boil. She removed her hand.

The boy, Kranki, came with her drink – arak also, with ice and a jug of water. She poured water into the drink and watched the colour change. Kranki said, "I can hear it."

"Hear what?"

"It," the boy said, insistent, pointing at the aug.

"Well, what does it say?" Miriam said, taking a sip of her drink. She saw Boris was watching the boy intently.

"It's confused," Kranki said.

"How so?"

"It feels something strange from its host. A very strong emotion, or a mix of emotions. Love and lust and regret and hope, all tangled together... It's never experienced that before."

"Kranki!"

Miriam hid a shocked laugh as Boris reared back, turning red.

"That's quite enough for today," Miriam said. "Go play outside."

The boy brightened considerably. "Really? Can I?"

"Don't go too far. Stay where I can see you."

"You can always ping my node," he said, and ran out without a look back.

"Sorry about that," Miriam said.

"It's...it's all right." He smiled, looking younger, reminding her of other days, another time. "I thought about you, often," he said.

"Boris, why are you here?"

He shrugged again. "After Tong Yun I got a job in the Galilean Republics. On Callisto. They're strange out there, in the Outer System. It's the view of Jupiter in the sky, or...they have

strange technologies out there, and I did not understand their religions. Too close to Jettisoned, and Dragon's World...too far away from the sun."

"That's why you came back?" she said, a surprise laugh. "You missed the sun?"

"I missed home," he said. "I got a job on the moon, it was incredible to be back, so close, to see Earthrise every morning... The Inner System felt like home. Finally I took a holiday, and here I am." He spread his arms. "I missed the sort of rain that falls from clouds."

"Your dad's still around," Miriam said. "I see him from time to time."

Boris smiled, though the web of lines at the corners of his eyes – they weren't there before, Miriam thought, suddenly touched – revealed old pain. "Yes, he's retired now," he said.

She remembered him, a big Russian man, wearing an exoskeleton with a crew of other builders, climbing like metallic spiders over the uncompleted walls of the space port. There had been something magnificent about seeing them like that, they were the size of insects high up there, the sun glinting off the metal, their pincers working, tearing down stone, erecting walls to hold up, it seemed, the world.

She saw him now, sitting at the cafés, playing backgammon, drinking the bitter black coffee, endless cups of chipped china, throwing the dice, smoking, in the shadow of the edifice he had helped to build, and which had at last made him redundant.

"Are you going to see him?" she said.

Boris shrugged. "Maybe. Yes. Later – " He took a sip of his drink and grimaced and then smiled. "Arak," he said. "I forgot the taste."

Miriam smiled too. Her friend, Shelly, had gotten up, and left money on the table and went out, touching Miriam lightly on the shoulder as she passed. "I'll see you later?" she said, and Miriam nodded, still smiling.

It was quiet in the shebeen, the tentacle junkie lay in his tub with his bulbous eyes closed, the two cargo workers were chatting in low voices, sitting back. Then Kranki was beside them. She hadn't seen him come in but he had the knack, all the children here had it, you had to know to disappear. He saw them smiling, and started smiling too.

Miriam took his hand. It was warm.

"We couldn't play," the boy complained. There was a halo above his head, rainbows breaking through the wet globules of water in his short, spiky hair. "It started to rain again." He looked at them with boyish suspicion. "Why are you smiling?"

Miriam looked at this man, Boris, this stranger who had once been someone that the someone she had been once loved.

"It was just the rain," she said.

Lavie Tidhar is the author of the BSFA Award nominated *Osama*, which has been compared to Philip K. Dick's seminal work *The Man in the High Castle* by both the Guardian and the Financial Times. He is also the author of the Bookman Histories novels, comprising *The Bookman*, *Camera Obscura* and *The Great Game*, and of many other novellas and short stories.

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seeking CAPTAIN RANDOM

DREAMS TELL YOU WHAT YOU REALLY BELIEVE, DEEP DOWN. BUT SOMETIMES IT takes a while before you understand them.

“When I climbed the hill of bones, the shaman was waiting for me,” Darren said, stirring Nutrasweet into his herbal tea. “Except now he was a giant rat. Like ten feet tall.”

Darren’s always told me about his dreams. Ever since he quit his office job to write comic books full time, his dreams have gotten weirder. I figure he’s really dreaming about how to pay the rent next month, though I can’t see what the giant rat has to do with anything. I was probably more worried about Darren’s rent than he was, even though we weren’t roommates anymore.

Around us, the coffeeshop was nearly empty. We sat at our usual table – the four-seater with room for my wheelchair. Darren’s backpack and bike helmet occupied the extra chair. The late-September sunlight stretched through the window like it wasn’t ready to leave. I asked, “So did the rat-shaman have the sword ready for you like he’d promised?”

“He did,” said Darren. “But he wouldn’t give it to me. He said I had to visit the river and bring him a rock.”

“Standard quest procedure,” I remarked, tearing away a chunk of my chocolate chip cookie. I ate it and licked my fingers carefully. “When you find what you thought you wanted, you realize you were looking for something else all along.”



"But here's the thing, Alice. So I went to the river, and there – in the jungle – was a guy in swim trunks. He didn't say anything to me. He just handed me a beer and then he left."

Better than TV. That's my friend Darren. "Did you find the rock?"

"Yeah. I took it back to the shaman. And then I was flying away and – I guess the dream ended, or I changed dreams, or something. I don't remember."

"Most people have lots of dreams they don't remember." I remembered mine occasionally, mostly when I had a steady boyfriend and was taking the pill. It'd been a while. Darren and I had always been platonic.

"But that guy. He didn't belong in that dream."

"What, and the giant rat did?"

Darren grinned, tucking his shaggy hair behind his ears. "Okay, it does sound funny when you put it that way. But I mean the beer guy didn't have anything to do with the quest. The one the shaman sent me on. Hell, he didn't even belong in that setting."

I touched my hot chocolate underneath the foam, but it was still too warm. "I dunno. A jungle is a lovely place for a swim. Think about the piranha."

"I'm serious," he said, drinking his tea and wincing. He sucked in cool air. "That guy is what I'm interested in."

"Why?"

"Because he's not part of the dream. He didn't matter. He didn't point me to the best rock, or warn me about the shaman, or threaten me. He just showed up. A cameo appearance."

"Let's call his agent and complain," I said, smiling.

Darren ignored me. "So why is he there at all? He's not relevant. The story arc would have been the same without him. And the guy's shown up in other dreams too. Like he's a guest star. Someone wandering from dream to dream. Captain Random."

"Captain Random would be a great name for a comic book character," I told him.

"Come on, Alice, be serious. He's not part of the dream, I'm sure. I've been thinking about story arc lately because of the rejection note I got for *Bruiser Ballast* last week. You know, the pages I wrote and inked in three days because I just *knew* how it went."

Now I wished I hadn't made fun of him. Darren's comics were his babies. "That sucks. You didn't tell me it got rejected again. What's wrong with those people? I think it's awesome."

We talked about the nuts and bolts of his work, and my latest parental drama, and then we went home. I was thinking about the conversation all evening. Mostly I think I was jealous because Darren has the coolest dreams and I don't remember mine. But Darren also doesn't have problem-solving skills like I do. Comes from my line of work. I liked the idea of a random character that wandered from dream to dream. I decided to track down Captain Random, as Darren called him, using the Internet and the library. I figured Jung or Freud would have covered this ground already. It didn't sound too hard. At their core, dreams – like everything else – must be rational things.

There's three things people should know about me. I'm a 911 dispatcher, I'm disabled, and I'm a skeptic. They're all part of

why I like Darren so much.

First, my work. I've been a dispatcher for about two years now. I started because the money was nice, even for a college dropout, but I stayed because I'm really good at it. I never forget a voice, like the way some people are with faces. And when I'm on the phone, I command the situation. I'm in control. I'm the one who decides which officers go where, and what victims do next. I work the swing shift – four 10's, Thursday through Sunday. That's why Darren and I set up the coffeeshop meeting on Mondays after my physical therapy. Everyone else is at work, and Darren and I have the place to ourselves, except for a few college students.

The disabled part is simple. I've got mild cerebral palsy, which means I walk like a chicken that survived a car wreck. I can get around on crutches when I have to, but the chair's much easier and doesn't hurt my back. No retardation or speech issues, lucky for me. I mention it only because people ask me all the time, or look like they want to. I don't worry about it and neither should anyone else. The skeptic part is also simple: I don't believe in anything that can't be proven with concrete facts – like God, astrology, or ESP. My parents tried faith healing on me when I was a kid, and it's clear how well *that* worked.

For the things I can't do well, Darren's my backup. He never runs out of compassion. He knows when to get something off a shelf and when to let me handle it myself. And he always makes me think. Even when I don't agree with his crazy pants theories about the world, sometimes I can imagine – just for a moment – there's something worthwhile up ahead. Something more than decomposing into the dirt.

I try not to think about it, but that's what scares me more than anything else: when I die, it's done. Over. It's enough to give you a drinking problem. Personally, I cope by eating chocolate chip cookies. But it's always in the back of my mind. I don't get to pick when or where I get snuffed out. Like hitting a brick wall. The end.

Darren and I had a standing coffee-date for Mondays at 4PM. At least, that was the official plan. Neither of us liked coffee and Darren never knew what time it was. One time he flaked out on me and didn't show up until 6, after I'd left him voicemail and gone home. Lots of people would give up on friends like that, but I'm patient and my schedule's crazy anyway. There's worse flaws in a friend.

This week, Darren was only fifteen minutes late. "I tracked him," he said, before he even sat down. He was still wearing his bike helmet and the beat-up backpack he'd had ever since I'd known him. Darren lived cheap, which was how he could afford to quit his job. He wore loose-soled shoes and he'd duct-taped the pockets on his backpack. I could see his cell phone and his asthma inhaler poking out. At least he wasn't skimping on his meds – not yet.

"Tracked who?" I asked.

Darren grinned like he'd figured out something clever. "The guy. Captain Random."

"Oh, good," I told him. "I've been reading up on that. Dream interpretation is pretty crazy. Seems like an excuse for people to make up their wishlist and convince themselves it's true."

He took off his bike helmet and set it with his backpack on the extra chair, like they were our third companion. He slid

into his seat and said, "But dreams aren't usually random, like this guy."

"Okay, dream interp 101," I told him. "First off, your dreams are part of you. They help you filter your life experiences and understand them. They come from your unconscious mind."

"Like getting knocked on the head?" he said, smiling.

"Ha ha. No, what I'm saying is that dreams are real, and they're rational. You can actually control them. That's the first step to understanding them. I think our friend Captain Random has a method to his madness. I think he stands for something important."

Darren rubbed his head, trying to smooth his hair from the bike helmet. He only made it messier. "The same thing every time?"

"Could be. Where have you seen him?"

"Oh, a bunch of places. He's been a clown in a nude bakery, a housewife in a meat locker, and a pizza delivery guy at M.C. Escher's office."

"Scuse me?"

"Wrong address. Showed up and left again and didn't seem to change the dream."

"That's *totally* random," I said, laughing. "Darren, you're a freak. I don't know how you function in this world."

He chuckled. "Well, if you opened the door on M.C. Escher building a house of burning cards, you might be a little nervous too."

"Were the cards all warped like his drawings?"

"Not really. They were just regular playing cards. Except, y'know, on fire."

"Right. Man, I don't know how you get this stuff in your brain. You must have layers and layers of filtering going on. Like everything you see and do gets translated through Darrenspeak."

"It's kinda weird," he said.

"I think it's awesome," I said firmly. "I think you connect to a deep part of your brain that most of us can't get to. I don't get my own dreams, so I have to live through yours."

"I don't know where my ideas come from," he said. "I just sort of...don't censor them. Like right now I'm thinking about whether the lights could turn into fish and swim away from the ceiling, and if you overfed them would they go belly-up so you could see the wiring beneath?" He paused and laughed. "Sorry, but I mean, that's what it's like."

Probably that's what went through his head on Mondays at 4PM instead of remembering to call me and say he was late. I grinned at him. "Okay, Mr Fishlights. So you said you tracked Captain Random. I've started a list: nude clown, pizza guy – what was the other one?"

Darren hesitated. I wondered if he was going to order some tea.

"Alice," he said, his voice dropping low, "I mean I *tracked* Captain Random. I went looking for him, on a quest. I was in a library – in my dream, I mean – and I turned the corner and saw a whole shelf of books. Kenny Shaw was there. He was this kid in second grade who was before me in roll call. Totally random. And I saw an old woman dressed in furs, with white braids hanging to her knees. She took a book off the shelf and handed it to me. I opened it and the book was filled with runes

I couldn't read. I flipped to the end and the last page was blank. That's when I looked up and saw that the library was empty. In the spot where Kenny had been standing there was a sixer. A six-sided die, I mean. And here it is."

Darren pulled something out of his pocket. He opened his fist and showed me a die. My eyes widened – after a story like that, whose wouldn't? I took the die. It was an ordinary white cube with black dots, exactly like one from a Monopoly game. That's when my senses caught me, and I started laughing. "Oh my God, Darren. You had me. You totally did. Hell of a story."

He tapped his fingers on the table, then his face shifted to its usual grin. "Yeah. Hell of a story."

"Now I want this thing. Captain Random's cryptic message! Seriously, this is your next comic script."

"Keep it," he said, looking out the window. "It's just a sixer. Not what I thought it'd be. Like you said the other day – standard quest procedure."

I tucked it into my bag and forgot about it for a while. It was another of Darren's crazy stories, the kind he wrote down and sold for a living. That's what I thought back then.

I like my job, mostly. Decent pay, great benefits. Sometimes I save lives. Sometimes I can't save lives, but I help the survivors. And sometimes – often – I get reminders that some people are too dumb to live. Like the lady who called because she'd gotten off the wrong freeway exit and saw a brown person. Or the guy who dropped a coffee mug and was afraid the lead paint would vaporize. Believe me, I've heard it all. For every baby I've saved from choking, I've listened to someone shoot himself in the mouth.

No one calls 911 on a good day. I'm talking to people at their worst. It's the most important five minutes of their lives. I feel sorry for lots of them, but sometimes I've just got to laugh. It's not just me – it's all the dispatchers. People don't get that. You've got to keep a sense of humor, or you'll go absolutely insane. When you can't laugh about it – that's when you take a mental health day. Otherwise you burn out.

Darren always got this. He's one of the few people I could really talk to. Once, about a year ago, we were coming home from a movie. We passed 540 Oak Street, and I blurted out, "Hey, this is where that guy strangled his wife last week."

With most people I wouldn't say that, because it would creep them out. Not Darren. He stopped at the plain gray house and said, "The place looks like any other. You'd never know. Poor woman." It was right there that it all hit me: this woman died. Not just a voice on the phone – she *lived* here. An actual person with a house like her neighbors. Maybe they knew what hell her domestic life was, or maybe they didn't. But now she's dead, and there's nothing left of her except maybe some ashes. That's it – she's done. I never forgot that incident. Like I said, Darren keeps me real.

And it was just after the talk about Captain Random – the one where Darren gave me the die – when everything fell apart. That Sunday, Kim missed work. Nasty food poisoning, poor girl. Not her fault – but I got stuck with her shift. My boss Becca called around, but no one else was available. We can't have uncovered shifts. So that meant twenty straight hours of work for me. I'd done it before, and I could do it again.

But in the nineteenth hour of that shift, after I'd stacked six empty Diet Coke cans on my desk – the call came in. Worst thing I've ever heard on a call, but I didn't know it at the start. Stranded motorist at Lakeland and the 94. Pretty run-of-the-mill, not like he was in any real trouble. Sounded like a young white guy from somewhere Southern. Gravelly voice, talked slow. I determined the facts: he was on a freeway shoulder curve, out of traffic, nobody hurt. My officers were busy with a hit-and-run in a parking lot. I told the motorist I'd send an officer as soon as one was free, and he should stay with his car and wait.

With. I wish I could unsay that word.

Five minutes later, I got a frantic call from a woman about something at the Lakeland offramp. Vehicular homicide. Turns out the guy sat on his rear bumper waiting for the cop to show. A teenage girl took the curve too sharp. Didn't see his car. Plowed right into him. My officer – Paul, my rookie – that's what he arrived to see.

I wanted to slam down my headset, but that's never an option. I held myself together – hell, Paul sounded like he was going to cry too. But we talked each other through it, and he managed to tell the guy's wife without losing it. Becca told me it wasn't my fault, but – I could have said "in." I usually say "stay in your car." I just didn't.

When I motored on out of there, I felt like a zombie on Prozac. I went home and took a long bath. When it was morning enough, I called to cancel my physical therapy. Then I left voicemail for Darren telling him I'd had a bad day at work and needed some sleep. I went to bed and slept a few hours, then woke up like something had startled me. I was thinking of Darren's house of burning cards, from his M.C. Escher dream. It felt like I'd been dreaming, but I couldn't remember any of it.

I spent the afternoon doing quiet things: Minesweeper, a jazz concert on the radio, and homemade chocolate chip cookies. I don't take mental health days often, but when I do, I make damn sure I keep them effective. Free days don't relax you if you try to scrub the toilet. At 4PM I was re-reading a favorite Agatha Christie that I trusted not to surprise me. Darren hadn't returned my call, but I hardly noticed. He was like that, after all.

My mental health day turned into two, and then I felt great. Went back to work on Thursday like always. The usual. Call after call – never know what's next. First there's a woman whose ex-husband is breaking down her door. Then there's someone who dropped her wedding ring down the drain. Then a toddler fell in the pool and needed CPR, and then an old man told me he's going to shoot himself – except really he was just lonely and wanted someone to talk to. He lived alone, he said, and his kids were dead and he didn't know who was going to pick up his body. I talked him down, and when the cops got there he didn't have a gun anyway. I never know how to feel about people like that – I mean, they're wasting my time and taxpayer money, but think about how desperately lonely you have to be to call 911 for company. It was my last call Sunday night, so that wasn't a bad way to end things.

On Monday, I showed up at the coffeeshop like always. No Darren. By 4:30 I figured he'd flaked. I called his cell – no answer. I remembered that I never heard from him last week

when I cancelled, so I got worried.

I took the bus to Darren's new place and scooted up the ramp. When I knocked on Darren's door, an older woman in a blue dress opened up. Tears streaked her face. Behind her stood a man that looked like a gray-haired Darren with heavy lines around his mouth and eyes.

"Is..." I snapped into work mode. "What happened to Darren?"

The woman started crying. The man folded his arms and walked into the kitchen. The woman – Darren's mom, I was sure – glanced at my wheelchair and said, "Are you Alice? You must be Alice. He told us about you once. Didn't you live with him?"

"Yes. I need to know what happened to Darren."

"I'm so sorry. We didn't know how to contact you. We don't know who his friends are. We don't know anything." She rubbed her eyes. "Come in, honey. Excuse me, I need a Kleenex."

I wheeled myself into the apartment. The place was half-packed into fresh cardboard boxes, all identically sized like they came from a warehouse. Darren's bookshelves were empty. His desk still held bottles of ink. His half-finished comic project showed lamps swimming away like fish.

I knew, before his mom told me the details. Asthma attack. Biking in the park last Monday afternoon. The duct-taped pockets on his backpack had ripped. His inhaler and cell phone fell out a half-mile up the road. "It was terribly unlucky," his mom said. "They got there as soon as someone found him and called for help. But he slipped away..."

I slid into a familiar place – a numbness where words lived – and I spoke them without believing. "I'm so sorry. I know Darren's friends. I'll take care of telling everyone. How can I help you here?"

Asthma is *not* supposed to fucking kill people. Not when people survive triple gunshot wounds and electrocution and God knows what else.

Darren, you idiot. You stupid, careless – I was going to lose it. I missed him already. God. I loved that guy.

Darren's death hurt like hell. I went back to work anyway, because what else could I do? There's bills to be paid, and I couldn't get admin leave for my ex-roommate. But I couldn't stop thinking about him. If I'd gone to the coffeeshop like always – I would have called him. Maybe gone looking for him. Wouldn't I? Surely I'd recognize the most important five minutes of Darren's life. No, if I'd been at the coffeeshop – he'd have been there too. Not biking. Not having an asthma attack. Or at least I'd have been there and known what to do.

After that, I started looking for Captain Random everywhere I could. When I watched the World Series on TV, I scanned the crowd, looking for the guy who didn't belong. When I rode the bus to work, I studied everyone else, looking at their faces. Was it that man in the Bermuda shorts? How about the woman with a pink shopping bag who kept turning around like someone was talking to her?

What if I'd been on shift and taken that call about Darren?

It was stupid. But I couldn't stop.

Two months later, I was Christmas shopping in the suburbs – looking for the bed slippers my dad really likes, even though

he hasn't sent me anything in years. A street festival filled the plaza by the shopping mall. It hadn't snowed yet, so the ground was bare. The booths were decorated with fake icicles, like everyone hoped that consumer spending could force a white Christmas.

I was patiently getting through the crowd when I saw a guy who looked like Darren. Shaggy blond hair, white bike helmet – even that duct-taped backpack. I couldn't see his face. I watched him buy something at an art booth and put it in his pocket. Left-handed, just like Darren. I wheeled after him as he stopped at another vendor and bought gingerbread cookies. I'd been struggling through the crowd all afternoon, but now it parted for me just when I needed it.

I knew it wasn't Darren. Darren was dead. But this guy looked just like him. I wanted to approach him and say – I don't know what. Hi, you look like my friend who died, and I wish I could've told him some stuff? Ridiculous.

Just then he turned and looked at me, and it *was* Darren. I felt shivery like I was in some ghost movie. He turned and walked away from the festival, toward the mall's loading zone where all the trash and dumpsters stood. I zipped after him so fast my arms hurt. "Wait!" I called to him. My mind was still sorting through rational explanations for this. Maybe I was asleep and dreaming – but no, I never remembered dreams, and besides I'd used my credit card today. So I'd have proof later that this was definitely happening. Okay. For now, I'd go with it, and check my credit card bill later.

We turned around the mall into the loading zone. I wasn't worried about safety – I trusted my instincts, and I knew I'd be fine. I just had to talk to him. What was he *doing* here? He was dead. He didn't belong here.

That's when I knew who I was following.

It was easy to keep pace with him, and no matter how fast I rolled, he stayed the same distance ahead. He stopped at some empty pallets in the dock and sat down. When I came closer, I saw his face. Not Darren. I couldn't figure out why I'd thought it was Darren, because his face was entirely different even though the features were the same.

I opened my bag and pulled out the die. "I think this is yours," I said, feeling silly. I extended my hand towards him, palm up.

He took the die from my hand without touching my skin, which relieved me for some reason. "Thank you," he said gravely. His voice sounded like Darren's, but somehow it just wasn't. I couldn't name exactly how, and that scared me.

"Are you Darren?" I asked.

"You know who I am."

I looked at him. Lying seemed pointless. "Are you actually here? Are you a real person?"

He shook his head, looking at me with that not-Darren expression in Darren's face. "You can do better than that."

I gripped my wheels. "Was it my fault? Would he have died even if I'd been there? Who's running this place and how do they decide these things?"

"Those are all good questions," he said. "And now it's time for me to go."

He stood up. "Wait!" I said. "I followed you here. Can't I get the answer to anything? Even one question? Because what I really need to know is where we go when we die. Please."

He smiled and looked sad. "You followed me here to talk to me. You've been looking for me, right?"

"Yeah."

"You do realize that by speaking to me, you made me part of this scene? I belong here now. I'm no longer who you're looking for. Standard quest procedure."

I stared at him, speechless. His face morphed into someone I didn't recognize – a young white guy in a baseball cap. He tossed the die into the air, caught it in one hand, and smiled. "See you, Alice," he said, his voice turning rough and Southern.

Just like that, he was gone. He didn't vanish literally – more like he walked away and my brain didn't register it. I sat alone in the loading dock, listening to machinery and smelling the dumpster. I pulled out my cellphone and called my credit card company, who confirmed that I'd made some purchases today. Their numbers matched my receipts. There was nothing to do but go home and cry.

And that's just the thing. Everything I claimed to believe in crumbled under pressure. I can't be an atheist when deep down I think I'm wrong. Captain Random walks where he chooses and leaves signs of his passage. All my paper-thin rationalizations collapse into ash, like a burning house of cards.

Vylar Kaftan has published about three dozen stories. Her 2010 *Light-speed* story, 'I'm Alive, I Love You, I'll See You in Reno', was nominated for a Nebula. She founded FOGcon, a new literary sf/f convention in the San Francisco Bay Area, and she blogs at www.vylarkaftan.net.





BLOODCLOTH by Ray Cluley

TANYA DREW CIRCLES IN THE DUST ON THE FLOOR WHILE she waited for her father to come home from the caves. She drew a smile in one of them, intending to make a face, but it didn't look right so she made it another circle within the circle. She looped them together with another one, turning a half circle herself when the floorboards nearest her knees were full. She was humming something half remembered but didn't know until Mother called for her to be quiet. So she was.

She could hear Mother's breathing now, long and slow, and it made her think of Grandma, which made her look at the curtain hanging in front of her. She didn't like the curtain because of what it did to Grandma, but she liked to sit by it for the same reason. Mother hated it. She hated it because of Grandma, but for lots of other things as well. And she was scared of it. Tanya would understand when she was older but she wasn't sure she wanted to.



The curtain was pale at the moment, except for a fading pink near the middle where Father had wiped his hands. It was still creased and bunched a little in that area, but mostly it hung straight and heavy, its faint meaty smell barely noticeable. Folds of its flesh piled upon themselves on the floor at the corner, the rail still crooked because Father was too used to it now to make fixing it a priority. There were two dead flies in the creases there, their bodies dried husks, legs curled in tight. Tanya wondered if there were any entombed within the folds, if they would disintegrate into flakes and add their dust to the rest of it on the floor.

"Hummingbird?"

Tanya stopped humming again but asked, "Yes Ma?" in case there was more. She heard her mother shift in bed, the creak of the wood.

"What time is it?"

Tanya stood and brushed her skirts clean. She went over to the mantle and checked the clock there. It didn't tick, it only tocked, offering a moment of quiet remembrance for each missing sound between. Tanya would sometimes get a big tick at the schoolhouse if her work was right but Father said just because the clock didn't have any didn't make it wrong. Mother had smiled, but to Tanya it always sounded like something was missing, when she noticed it at all. Usually it tocked like she hummed; without knowing and barely heard. When she noticed it, though, she noticed it all the time.

"It's nearly six."

"Your father will be home soon."

Tanya sat again and resumed her circles, moving dust round and round with her finger as the clock tocked quietly. Tocked. And tocked.

"Yes Ma."

The curtain shivered but Tanya ignored it, pretended not to see, because she knew why it moved and what it waited for.

Tanya set the table without knowing what dinner would be, laying out bowls on top of plates and lining up spoons next to forks next to knives. She put the two candles they had in the middle and put a cushion on one chair in case Mother joined them in the kitchen. She was trying to plump it into a shape it had given up long ago when she heard the gate catch on the gravel path with a sudden sharp crunch, and then the rusty groan it only made when closing.

"Dad's home."

He was late, the tocking clock close to half past seven.

But it wasn't Father. It was another man from the caves, a man called Gerald who had a bushy beard but no hair on his head.

"Hello Tanya, is your mother home?"

He must have known she was. Everybody knew she was bed-ridden. Only for a little while, but everybody knew.

"Who is it?" Mother called from her room.

"It's Gerald, ma'am. Your husband, he's... Well, he's working late." Gerald was calling the information from the door because Tanya hadn't invited him in yet. "Asked me to bring you some dinner."

"Come in. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Gerald came in, giving Tanya a smile with a bottle of pop

drink. She didn't have pop drink often so it was very easy to smile back.

"No, don't get yourself up. It's just a bit of stewing beef and a few vegetables. I'll put it on the table."

Which he did. It was more than a few vegetables, and the stew-beef was wrapped in a lot of paper so there was probably more than a bit of that, too. Tanya thought it was a nice lie, though.

She twisted the lid off her bottle with it near her face so the hiss-fizz of it would wet her cheek and tickle.

Gerald went to the doorway where Mother's room was. "It's simple enough for the little one to cook," he said. "You rest up some more."

Mother said something in reply but Tanya didn't hear it because she was swallowing. She took too much and had to burp quietly afterwards. She hid it in her hand.

"No, I'll show her how. Don't you worry. Can I get you something to drink?"

He didn't go into the room. Maybe to be polite, maybe because of the sick smell.

"Here," said Tanya. She went in because she was used to the sick smell now. She held up the pop drink. There was most of it left still.

Her mother was laying on top of the sheets and Tanya couldn't help but think of the flies on the curtain though she didn't mean to. Her mother smiled because she didn't know about the flies or Tanya's thoughts and said, "No, dear, you drink it."

"It's delicious, you'll like it," Tanya promised, words her mother and father had used on her plenty of times, even though sometimes it wasn't true.

"It tickles my nose too much," Mother said. But she licked her lips and Tanya thought maybe it was another nice lie that adults do sometimes. "Go and help Gerald in the kitchen." Then louder, to Gerald, "Would you like to stay for supper?"

Gerald was stroking his beard like he was far away, looking over at the curtain in the front room. Tanya wondered when Father would be home, and wondered if the curtain wondered.

"Ma wants to know if you'd like to stay for supper." She took another sip of drink. A little one, to make it last longer.

"That's very kind," he said. He said it twice, the second time so Mother could hear as well, adding, "I've got to get on back to the caves."

He crouched so he was nearly Tanya's height, though he was so big he could never be so small, and asked, "Do you want to learn how to cook a grown-up dinner?"

Tanya thought that was even better than a pop drink because she only knew how to make sandwiches (without cutting them because knives were dangerous) so she nodded hard enough to put her hair in her eyes, which made Gerald laugh.

When he was finished laughing the house sounded more sad.

Gerald told her to wash her hands first then showed her how to fill the pan with enough water to cover the meat. There was a lot of it. Some of it was stringy but he said it didn't matter because of how it would cook. He showed her how to cut the vegetables and said to use them all even though there were a lot because they wouldn't keep but in the stew they would. He

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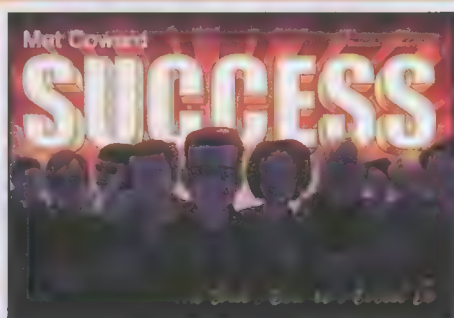
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showed her how to use the knife properly and safely and said big chunks were better but Tanya knew that was because it was safer. When Father cooked he cut things really small.

"It will take a while to cook properly. When it starts to bubble, turn it down so it just bubbles a little bit, and stir it once in a while." He showed her how. "And then just wait until your mother says it's ready. She'll know when. If you get hungry waiting, eat some of the carrot pieces we saved, remember? I always save a couple to nibble on."

Tanya decided she loved Gerald a little bit.

He came down next to her again, squatting so they were nearly the same height but never quite. "You know, your father works hard so you both have food and this house and so you don't have to pay tribute too often. You know that, don't you?"

Tanya nodded. She tipped the pop bottle up for the last of it but the last of it was gone.

"And he will always try to keep things that way, alright? Even if things look bad, he'll try and make it good like it was."

She nodded again, giving up on the bottle but deciding to keep it. She'd put a flower in it for Mother's dinner tray.

Gerald stood and ruffled her hair.

"Good," he said. "That's good."

He wiped his hands on his trousers after, even though her hair wasn't dirty, and then he did something unexpected. He walked quickly over to where the curtain hung and put his hands to it. He didn't wrap them up in the middle like Father did, bunching it up around his hands like he was drying them, but placed them palm-flat against the flesh and let it feed. It was such a surprise that Tanya watched even though she never liked to. She watched the red spread from his fingertips, saw the lines become pink as they stretched out from his hands, only to deepen to crimson as he waited, and waited. Waited. With a final grunt, he withdrew his hands and stepped back. The curtain where he'd touched it was so dark it was black. Father never gave it *that* much.

"Right," he said. His face was still dirty from the caves but it was white, too, around the dirt. Pale, like the curtain used to be. "You watch that stew now."

Tanya nodded and he left, calling a polite goodbye to Mother but Mother was asleep again.

"Bye Gerald," Tanya said for her, but the door was already closing. She heard the gravel beneath his boots as he walked away and watched his black handprints fade to dark brown and then maroon, deep red to mauve to a fading pink. The colours of dying, that's what Mother called them. Briefly, it had been the auburn colour of her hair.

Tanya watched until there was no longer any trace of tribute, by which time the stew was ready.

Tanya first learnt about the curtain at the schoolhouse. She never used to want to go to school, she wanted to work in the Drapery when she was older like Mother, and like Grandma used to before she got sick. Grandma told her stories about it, which was like being at school half the time anyway. Grandma told her about Grandpa too, who was a brave man and fought in a war but didn't come back. He wasn't killed, he just didn't come back. Father said that meant he wasn't brave at all but Mother said there was always another way of looking at it and

he probably had his reasons, which is what Grandma said as well. There were lots of photos of him in an album Grandma kept, a big book which was almost as cracked and leathery as Grandma.

"This is him when we first met," Grandma pointed out. Tanya was sitting on the bed with her, drinking tea because Grandma said she could. She didn't like it much but she pretended to.

"He's younger than Father."

"He was then, yes. And that's me."

Grandma looked just like Mother, and people said Tanya looked just like Mother too, so that meant she'd look just like Grandma one day.

"You're very pretty," Tanya said, which was true but sounded like boasting.

"I was a bit. Not now. I'm cleverer now, though, and that's important."

Which was how they started talking about the schoolhouse where Mother and Father wanted her to go. Tanya didn't want to because she knew it would be expensive and Father already paid a lot to the cloth. He was the only one who could, except Tanya, and they wouldn't let her.

"I don't want to go," she said again to Grandma, but of course Grandma persuaded her it was for the best.

They had a curtain at the schoolhouse bigger than the one in Tanya's house. It was mostly for the teachers but sometimes, on special days, the children had to touch it too. The curtains were a part of their lives long before they knew what they were, just like tables and chairs and the sky.

When Tanya went to Koji's house once she saw their bloodcloth wasn't a curtain; it was shaped and positioned like a flag. When Mr Aibagawa touched it he used his head instead of his hands, bowing so the top of his head met the bloodcloth. When he stepped away it looked like the flag of where they came from, Koji explained. Mr Aibagawa never touched it long enough for it to go black and dark, just red, but he made up for that by doing it often. Every day, Koji said. And one day Koji would be allowed to do it too. Tanya used to be jealous of that, once. Mr Aibagawa was always pale. So was Mrs Aibagawa, but she used make up to look that way.

Mrs Tucker at the schoolhouse said some people were so rich or famous or respected that instead of a red carpet they were welcomed to places by a sodden bloodcloth laid at their feet so soaked that they could walk barefoot without paying tribute. Tanya didn't know if she believed that or not, but she believed most of what Mrs Tucker taught her. She liked history lessons best because they sounded made up but weren't. That was when she first learnt about the bloodcloth curtains, but it was Koji who told her about ubasute.

"Hummingbird, what's wrong?"

They were in the bedroom, bowls of stew in their laps. Tanya was looking at her Mother, watching her eat.

"I was thinking of Grandma."

Mother pulled the blankets down and sat up straighter. She looked a lot like Grandma now, especially in bed, but not much when she sat up and shook her head so her hair hung back.

"I'll be alright," Mother said.

Tanya nodded.

"This is delicious stew," Mother said. "Is there much left?"

"Gerald said enough for three days if we filled up with bread as well."

Mother nodded and spooned herself another mouthful. Her hand trembled a little bit and she spilled some but it landed back in the bowl.

"Gerald touched the curtain before he left," Tanya said.

The spoon stopped partway to Mother's mouth, which she opened prematurely and then closed again. When she opened it the second time she managed to speak.

"How?"

Tanya told her about him putting both hands flat on it until it went dark, leaving his prints like waving bruises.

"He gave it a lot. Was it because Father's late?"

Mother began to cry.

There had been an accident at the caves. Father had been standing near one of the mangles when the chain that turned it buckled and snapped. The roller dropped and fat folds of bloodcloth spewed from the line behind like a thickened tongue, spilling and spilling into itself without the heavy press of the machine to flatten and shape it. Father had reached out to push the roller back in place and his arm had been engulfed in unprocessed flesh, wrapped in heavy bloodcloth that was getting heavier as it drained his limb. There had been no pain, he said, but he screamed and screamed because of what it might do and some of the other men managed to stop the machines and pull his arm out for him, digging through the layers of bloodcloth like it was laundry.

His arm was mottled yellow, like an old bruise. It had already withered to limp flesh and narrow bone. The rest of him was white, like moonlight.

"I wanted to see how bad it was," Father explained, "so I stayed in one of the bunkhouses for a while. I was hoping..." He shrugged instead of finishing.

They were sitting around the table. There was more stew cooking, reheating Tanya's and Mother's abandoned meals, but Tanya doubted she would ever eat stew again. The smell would always make her think of Mother crying, and Father's hitching breath as he tried not to.

"I wanted to see if it would...plump up." He raised his arm from the table as if they might not know what he was talking about. He did it too quickly, not yet used to the lightness of it. "I'm lucky I can still use it, I suppose."

He had avoided coming home until he knew more, but after Tanya said about Gerald and the curtain, Mother guessed something bad had happened. She made Tanya go and get Gerald again and then she made Gerald tell her what happened.

"You can lift it," Mother said. "You can't use it."

"No," Father agreed. "It's dried up."

It was quiet between them for a long moment.

"The arteries might open up again," he said. "Veins might redirect. If not, they'll have to amp—"

"Will you be able to work?"

Mother had asked Gerald the same thing but he didn't know. Neither did Father.

Tanya was silent and still. She knew if she made any noise or moved they'd remember she was there and send her to her

room. This was adult talk and normally they'd have a conversation like this in their own room, where she could still hear but where they didn't know she could still hear. Tanya was crying without fully understanding why, but she was doing it quietly.

Father's arm looked dead. It looked like the stringy meat Gerald had brought them, but with less colour.

"They didn't cut the cloth," he said. "No damage, no debt." He tried to smile for that at least, but it was weak.

Suddenly Mother struck out at Father, which was something Tanya had never seen and it made her shriek in surprise. Mother was sick and frail, so it wasn't much, but Father flinched from her as if it burned, and then she hit him again, and again, but she was sobbing by then and Father was gathering her in with his good arm and holding her close and she cried against him instead of hitting. She hugged him and hugged him.

"It's alright," he hushed, whispering into her hair. He beckoned Tanya over with a tilt of his head and hugged her too. "It'll be alright. We'll be alright."

The arm that held Tanya was dead and heavy on her shoulders, and his words were heavy in her heart because they didn't sound true.

"That's a lie," Tanya said, but Koji shrugged like he didn't care if she believed him or not.

"That's what they did when Mr Olderstein stopped working. He said he wanted them to do it when he couldn't teach no more because if he couldn't teach anymore he couldn't do much else either. They did it in assembly, wrapped him up in the schoolcloth so the classes wouldn't have to tribute for a while. It was before you were here."

"Yeah, maybe," Tanya allowed, unable to prove otherwise, "but Mrs Gowan is a woman. Women can't tribute."

"Old women can, just like little girls. It's the one's in between that can't. I dunno why."

Tanya thought she might know why because Mother had told her about the special blood that made you a woman. She didn't tell Koji, though. He would think it was gross.

Mrs Gowan worked in the Drapery where most women worked, although she was a supervisor instead of one of the cutters or pressers because she was old. Grandma said she sometimes did cut and press, though, if they needed people to. She'd put on special gloves. She worked a lot because her son was what Mother called special but the kids at the schoolhouse called stupid and slow and other mean names because he was a grown man but acted like a baby. When Mrs Gowan took on the sickness she wasn't able to do much anymore. Tanya always thought they moved away but Koji was saying she let them wrap her up in the curtain. They lay it on her like a bed sheet, he said. She did it for her son, Koji said, but couldn't explain more than that. Koji's dad said it was very noble, which was a word Tanya liked when Grandma explained it.

Tanya's father said it was stupid and that it should have been the son who was curtained to help the mother because he couldn't do anything and after her tribute what would he do? "Probably got wrapped up anyway," he said, "I reckon that's what the hospitals do all the time."

Father did not like the hospitals. Not many people did.

When Tanya asked Mother about it Mother asked a lot of

questions, sometimes more than once, and was angry with the Aibagawas for a while.

It was Grandma who explained what noble was and why Mrs Gowan did it.

Later that year, Grandma did the same thing herself.

After dinner, Tanya was told to go out and play, but not outside the fence. Mother and Father had a lot to talk about. They must have forgotten how late it was, probably because there'd been two dinners, but Tanya kept quiet because she wasn't usually allowed out at night.

She put on her jumper, one that Grandma had knitted. It had a lamb on it and the fluff of its fleece stuck out from the front. Tanya liked to pull it into shapes like hair styles. She went out the front but would go around back to hear what they said.

It was dark, and the town was quiet. At the front of the house the path twisted its way up into the mountains where the caves were. The mountains were big jagged triangles and you could only tell they were there because of where they cut into the sky, hiding the stars. A few of the other houses on the path had their lights on and Tanya watched shadows behind the curtains as people moved around inside. Window curtains that you could see through. She went around the side of the house, jumping down quietly from the porch and running through the tall weeds, slowing down when she saw the light spilling from the kitchen onto the back garden steps. If she sat on one of the low ones she could hear them without being seen from the window; the garden was very steep.

"...livestock allowance," Father was saying. Tanya hoped they were finally going to get a goat.

"We've been turned down every year we've applied."

"Yeah, well, things are different now aren't they?"

Father sounded angry and it made Tanya want to cry again. The lights of the town below blurred because her eyes were wet, but she didn't cry.

"Alan said he'll appeal about the accident, have the blood count as our -"

"Come on, it'll go to the town kitty if it counts at all."

Father had nothing to say to that.

"I could teach her at home," Mother continued. "As long as I'm sick, I should do something useful."

"We're not pulling her out of school."

"I can -"

"No."

This time a tear did fall but Tanya wiped it quick as if it was never there. She didn't want to stop school, but she would if Mother said so.

"Look," said Father, and his voice was softer, "I know you could teach her, but for how long each day before you had to rest? And it's not just about the lessons, it's about the other children. She needs to make friends and all that."

"Then let's move and she can make new friends. Not all towns have this stupid fucking tribute law."

The idea of moving made Tanya gasp and the bad word made Tanya gasp again straight afterwards. The light she was sitting in suddenly had a shadow in it and she nearly gasped another time because of its weird arm but she realised it was Father even before he opened the back door. She hopped off the step

quickly to run back to the front but she slipped and fell, hitting her knee on the stony ground and tumbling somehow down the path so it scraped the skin of her shins. Then Father was there, kneeling next to her and hushing her tears.

"It's alright," he said. "It'll be alright."

This time Tanya believed him.

Even after she'd been sent to bed Tanya laid awake for a long time. She kept pressing her knee which felt bigger than usual and squishy. It hurt a little bit but not too much, and the strange feel of it was interesting. It felt like the curtain did sometimes when it was full. Further down from her knee her shin pulsed with a dull throb. She could ignore that though because she was still trying to hear Mother and Father talking. She tried, but she couldn't make the sounds into proper words. When she closed her eyes to hear better, she fell asleep.

She dreamt of Grandma, calling her name from the front room, but every time Tanya went to see, she wasn't there.

It was nearly afternoon when Tanya woke up, which was alright because there was no school. She got up and winced because the sheet was stuck to her leg for a moment. She had a thin scab over her scrape and her knee was a dark colour but it only hurt if she touched it. It made her remember Father's arm and she went to see if it was better.

The bed in his room was empty. She went to Mother's room but hers was empty, too. It still smelled of the sick smell but the window was open and the bed was sort of made.

"Ma?"

Mother was in the kitchen. She was trying to make bread but she wasn't pushing the dough very hard. "Breakfast? There's some oats left."

Tanya shook her head.

"Your father's gone in to work today."

"What about his arm?"

"Yes, well, he's going to see if there's a different job he can do if he can't do his usual one."

"Is it better?"

"No, I doubt he'll get a better job, not now."

"I meant, is his arm better?"

"Of course it's not better."

Tanya was worried. Mother was moving the dough around but she wasn't doing much except pushing flour onto the floor.

"I can help," Tanya said. She went to the sink to wash her hands because she'd been playing with her new scab.

"I can do it, I'm not a cripple." Then she leant over the dough and her shoulders began to shake. "Sorry, hummingbird," she said. Her voice sounded watery. "Sorry."

Tanya said it was alright.

"Why don't you go and play for a while?"

But Tanya didn't want to play, not with other children anyway. Not today. She went to the living room and looked to see if her circles were still there in the dust. They were, though a couple had been scuffed a bit by Father's boots. The flies were still there too, and at first she thought there were more but it was a scattering of loose pebbles from the path outside where she fell. Next to them was the handkerchief Father had used on her shin. She gathered the little stones up into her palm,

leaving tiny dots wherever her fingertips touched the cloth. She could have used the handkerchief but she wanted to feel the cool clamminess of the curtain, to see if it felt different.

She couldn't tell.

Some people didn't like to touch it at all and they would "let their blood", Mother said. When Tanya said that sounded unfinished Mother said it would never be finished, so Tanya still didn't know what they let their blood do. It gave people scars, though.

She spent the afternoon waiting for her father to return, putting tiny pebbles into each circle she'd drawn, and picking carefully at the scab on her leg. It was still too fresh but she could lift it at the edges if she was gentle. Eventually, after some careful patient picking, she had only the fresh pinkness of new skin on her shin and the thin scab in her hand.

She dropped it where the curtain gathered on the floor. It was bleached white in moments.

"What are you doing?"

Mother stood in the doorway. She had flour on her dressing gown and on her cheeks.

"Nothing," said Tanya, but Mother came over anyway to see. By then the scab had crumbled to something a bit like flour and then even that was gone and they were looking at the "nothing" Tanya had said.

"You shouldn't play so close to it," said Mother.

"Why?"

Mother didn't reply. She just stared at the curtain, looking like she had a hundred questions of her own. Or was carefully considering an answer to a different question altogether.

When Father returned he had a slip of paper that said he couldn't work in the caves.

"They've shut it down."

Mother was laying on her side because it made breathing easier, but she turned and sat up. "All of it?"

"Just the system where it happened. Officially it's because of maintenance, but really they're worried the taste has hungered it. They didn't cut the cloth so now they need to let it settle, starve a little, work the other caves so it doesn't think... well, whatever it thinks. Then they'll declare the machines safe again."

"Can you work one of the others?"

Father sat on the bed and reached out to take her hand. He reached with his bad arm out of habit but Mother pulled away at first. Then she apologised and held it and Tanya wondered if she should be watching. She was in the doorway, standing on tiptoes and then lowering herself; tiptoes up, and then back down. It was easy if you held the door frame but trickier if you didn't.

"There's not much going. Now that they've closed one cave they've had to reassign men enough as it is, and some are out of work until it's open again."

"But you -"

"I was the man responsible. It's fair."

"It's *not* fair." Mother raised his arm by the wrist and shook it so his hand flapped.

"Stop it, Marjorie."

"You've got this and nothing else and a child to feed and put

through school."

"Stop it!"

She dropped his arm and he pulled it away from her.

"You still want to move? Fine, where will we go? Look at what happens at the other places; the loss of livestock and sometimes worse. *Often* worse. The lotteries, or a whole town enveloped just because -"

"I don't think that happens."

She said it to the covers and even Tanya could tell Mother didn't mean it.

"We all pay our bit and it stays away and we do alright. The accident's ours. The blood I lost has been reassigned to us. We'll be alright for a while. I'll find something."

Mother closed her eyes. "I need to get better, Henry. That's all."

"Yes." He stroked her forehead. He used his good hand. "Get better." Mother smiled and looked at him, took up his other hand in her own again.

It was a moment so intimate and tender that Tanya stepped away quietly from the room.

"Why isn't *your* mother sick?"

Koji shrugged, but he had an answer. "She had an operation after I was born."

"What kind of operation?"

He shrugged again, and this time there was no answer except, "I don't know. But she could pay tribute now, if she wanted. Father won't let her though."

Tanya wondered if the sickness and the bloodcloth in the mountains was linked. Mother said it was. She said it couldn't take their blood so it took something else in a different way. "Blood, sweat, tears, and spirit," she'd said. She had been trying to explain what happened to Grandma and Tanya wondered how she didn't cry because *she* couldn't stop.

Tanya remembered it very well. She'd come home from school and the first thing she'd noticed was the curtain in the front room was gone. The wall behind it was a cleaner dark colour than the rest of the wood and for a moment it looked like a door. Next she noticed Father's work things on the kitchen table, which meant he was home early. She went rushing in to her parents' room, for they'd shared a bed back then, calling for them, wanting to ask about Father being home and the missing curtain but also wanting to tell them about school and not knowing what order to do it in. They weren't there, but coming out she heard hurried voices, sharp like an argument but not angry, coming from Grandma's room, and then Father was coming out.

"Hey, little darling."

He tried to close the door behind him but she screamed for "Grandma!" because she'd already seen inside. It startled Father enough that she was able to get past his legs and into the room.

Mother was sitting beside the bed, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Grandma must have been in the bed like always but Tanya couldn't see her because the curtain was laid across it. She could tell where she lay, though, because the bloodcloth was a dark crimson colour clinging to the shape of her body like wet linen. Tanya could see the shape of Grandma's head, the tiny slope of her nose, the pillow rise of her breasts. She

could see each arm, the hands little spheres where Grandma had clenched them into fists. Her legs together made her seem like a mermaid, especially because of how her feet pointed up and out to make a triangle of curtain cloth.

"Hummingbird..."

Tanya thought it was Grandma speaking at first and yelled but the cloth at her mouth had not sank, she hadn't opened it, she -

"She can't breathe!" Tanya cried. "Ma, she can't breathe, get it off!"

Father had held her shoulders, tried to turn her around and out of the room, but Mother said no and that was when she explained. She told Tanya it was Grandma's decision, and she tried to explain about ubasute, which was a word Tanya had forgotten, but Tanya didn't really listen. And she couldn't look at Grandma either. She stared at the curtain pole that had been leant in the corner on the room, and one of the gloves Father was supposed to wear at work on the floor beside it, as Mother talked quietly. She said Grandma would always be with them, but Tanya didn't want her always in the curtain, and Mother brushed at her hair and rubbed her back to make her feel better. It didn't help because Mother was still wearing the other glove.

"Hey, Tanya." Koji pulled her hair to get her attention.

She rubbed her eyes and hoped he didn't think the tears were there because he'd yanked her ponytail. "What?"

"Drummond said that all girls have their own red curtains and that they bleed for a whole week every single month. Is that true?"

Tanya could see Drummond and his friends having a spitting competition against the schoolhouse wall. The other children were running around each other, calling and laughing and playing games while she and Koji sat on the bench eating their lunch.

"I think so," Tanya said. "I don't really know."

"Do you have to cut yourself? Where does it come from?"

Koji took a bite of his sandwich. Tanya decided not to tell him and shrugged instead.

"A whole week?" he said around a mouthful of bread. "How come you don't die?"

Tanya didn't know that, either. And anyway, thinking of Grandma and how sick Mother was, she sort of thought that they did.

Tanya went to bed that night thinking of the conversation she'd had with Koji and hearing her parents argue quietly in the room next door. It made for a troubled sleep.

She dreamt that she went to the caves, which was how she knew she was dreaming because girls weren't allowed. She was wearing her father's overalls, the long legs folded under her feet and wedged in the boots like thick socks. The safety helmet on her head was too big; when she looked up at the mountains she was walking to, it fell back and she had to hold it on, and when she looked back down at the path she walked upon it fell forward and covered her eyes. She had Father's long gloves clenched in one hand and kept trying to put them on, but they were always too big or, strangely, too small, and every time she tried she said, "Damn things don't fit right," even though she

knew not to say damn. She would throw them to the side of the path but after a few steps towards the caves they'd be in her hands again and she'd try them on again and all the time the caves weren't getting closer at all.

Pulling yet another glove onto her right hand she felt it fill with cold water but when it spilled over her cuffs she saw it was actually blood and she grunted her disgust, pulling the glove off quick and dropping it to the gravel path which was more like the one in her back garden than the road leading to the caves. Blood continued to spill from the glove, and it began to rise up out of the ground, emerging from the beneath the small stones like a bath was filling up underneath. Her shin was bleeding again, but instead of running down her leg it looked like it was running up from the ground and into her scraped graze.

"Get away!" Mother screamed. "Don't play so close to it!" But when Tanya looked up, letting the helmet fall off her head this time, she saw not her mother but all the men from the caves running downhill towards her. "Get away!" they all yelled together with Mother's voice. Some even made giant gestures with their arms, sweeping them forward to show her which way to run which was down, down, the same way as them, away from the caves, down.

Behind them, spilling from caves which were suddenly close, was wave upon wave of thick curtain flesh, bloodcloth unraveling from the mountain darkness like a huge fat tongue. It folded upon itself and pushed its way downhill, knocking down trees at the roadside and engulfing those too slow to outrun it.

Tanya turned and ran, not to flee the horror but to warn her parents, but somehow the curtain had overtaken her and she was running on top of it, terrified of falling over. It sank and squelched under her feet, blood spitting up like puddle splashes, the meaty smell as thick as the flesh it came from. Ahead of her, the mass of it washed up against the buildings below in giant fleshy waves. It poured into open windows and knocked down doors, filling houses with its hungry cloth that wasn't cloth, was never cloth, demanding its payment with a voice nobody could hear but everybody listened to which meant they couldn't hear her screaming, "No! No! No!" The only person who knew she was screaming was Tanya, and it woke her up.

Even awake, in her bed, in her room, the fear still gripped her, as tight as the cloth that was all over her like it was on Grandma, clutching at her legs, wrapped around her arms, and she fell from bed trying to get away from it.

Father came in and struck a light, Mother's calls of concern behind him in the dark house, and Tanya saw the curtain she struggled with was only her own bedding. The sheets were soaked with her sweat and her tears, but not with her blood.

Tanya blew the dust on the floor, bored of the circles she saw there. She rubbed them away with her hands. The wooden boards under her palms were worn smooth with age and use, and yet she felt a stab of pain; one of the edges had been scuffed rough and now she had a splinter in the pad of her finger. She pulled it out easily and waited for the blood to rise, wondering if she should give it to the curtain. She was never scared of her own blood like some children were. "Blood is a sign of living," Father said.

He won't bleed right, not anymore.

Tanya looked up because it sounded like Grandma but of course Grandma wasn't there. The curtain shivered in a breeze. The back door was open to let some air in for Mother but Tanya couldn't feel any.

He'll not be able to work, not a good job. And you know what will happen then.

The blood had come without her seeing. A small drop of it on her fingertip, a perfect half sphere rising from her skin. A tiny ruby.

The curtain brushed at the floor, tipping fly carcasses from its folds.

You could...

Tanya popped her finger into her mouth and, watching the curtain, sucked her own blood away.

The curtain was still. Tanya thought about what Grandma did and thought if *she* did it, yanked the curtain down and let it fall on her, then Father wouldn't need to worry about work until he got better, and Mother might even get better too and everything could go back to normal. Except it wouldn't be normal because Tanya wouldn't be here, she'd be with Grandma, and that bit would be alright but not being stuck in the curtain. She wondered what it would feel like, letting it take her blood, all of it, and she wondered what it would feel like to let her blood, let it do whatever it did when you gave yourself scars.

It will feel noble.

Tanya stood and went to the kitchen where she couldn't see the curtain anymore and couldn't hear it use Grandma's voice. She would ignore the curtain's call. There were dirty dishes still from when she made the stew and she thought she would wash them for Mother. That was what she meant to do.

Instead, she took up the knife she'd cut the vegetables with. She took it to the front room.

She still felt no breeze, yet the curtain, heavy as it was, shuddered. Tanya sat where it bunched in the corner, where the crooked pole dropped too much of it to the floor so that it gathered. She took up a length of it and felt immediately the pull of it in her hands. Was this how it felt when Father paid? Was this how it felt when his arm was swamped within its meaty crease? She felt warmth, like she'd plunged her hands into heated mittens, but none of it came from the cloth. Her hands were blushing, and wherever the cloth clutched her it fattened pink, red – and her hands were numbing. She had to be quick.

She held the knife to the curtain edge and pulled it across. The flesh parted easily, easier than she had expected. Like slicing a mushroom. One moment, and suddenly Tanya had a long corner length of bloodcloth in her lap. It curled where it had been cut and it bled a little before it could close. But it wasn't the curtain's blood really: it was hers.

Her hands tingled as if she'd been leaning on them too long, the tickly prickle of pins and needles. There was no blood on them. On the wall it rose in peaks, her blood rising like fire from the curtain's new wound. She wouldn't touch it again. This time she would bring her arm down in a long hard swing, dragging the blade through the cloth-flesh until she had split it down the middle. She would make it bleed. She would make it give back all that it had –

Mother's scream was so shrill, so loud, so close, that at first Tanya thought it had come from the curtain. It had burst the still air of the room at the precise moment she struck and she thought she'd stabbed Mother, that Mother was behind the curtain. But Mother was not behind the curtain, she was beside it, as sudden as her scream had been, and she wrenched the knife from Tanya's hand and pushed her back to the floor with surprising strength for one so sick.

"What are you doing? Don't!"

Tanya landed hard on her behind, teeth coming together on her tongue. She covered her mouth against the pain with both hands. The long slit in the curtain gaped at her as if surprised. There was nothing inside it, and nothing behind but wall.

"What are you doing?"

Tanya couldn't answer. She couldn't say anything, her mouth hurt so much. She wasn't even sure Mother had asked the question this time because she didn't wait for an answer. She pressed the parted bloodcloth together quickly, kneading it with more vigour than she had the bread, smoothing it over with her palms. It took nothing from her, of course, but it took the shape she forced it into. She retrieved the bloated slug-length of its severed piece and pushed it to open flesh, rubbing it into a new seam just as she had countless times at the Drapery, because the cut was fresh. It held. And it healed.

She turned to Tanya. Her breath was wheezing. She was wide-eyed, and Tanya saw the fear there turn to anger, but before she could take the full force of any reprimand, Mother's expression changed again. It softened. A glance down at something that had caught her eye caused her to return Tanya's pained look with one Tanya had never seen before. For an absurd moment it was like she had a sister instead of a mother and only the quiet tocking of the clock separated them.

"Oh, baby."

Tanya looked to her lap and saw the skirt of her dress was stained with blood. Not much, just a little where it bunched between her legs.

"It's mine," she said. Something she'd made the curtain give back. It made her want to smile, but she didn't because Mother was kneeling down next to her like Gerald had tried to do and she put her hand to Tanya's cheek and then to the side of her head, tucking a curl behind her ear.

"Yes, it's yours. Just a bit earlier than expected, that's all."

She began stroking Tanya's hair back.

"I heard Grandma."

"Hmm?"

Mother was smiling. She was breathing easier, too.

"In the curtain."

"Never mind the curtain," Mother said. "Not now."

The curtain was quiet. It made smiling back easier, especially when Tanya saw that, despite Mother's efforts, it now had some scars of its own.

Ray's last *Interzone* story was 'Fata Morgana' in issue #238 for which he is currently writing a sequel. 'Bloodcloth', meanwhile, is a little darker and perhaps shows his *Black Static* origins where several other stories of his have appeared. He has work in the current issue of *Shadows & Tall Trees* from Undertow Books as well as forthcoming from other publications. You can catch up with his work at probablymonsters.wordpress.com.



NINA ALLAN SUNSHINE

A NOVELETTE ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

BLACK STATIC ISSUE #29 • OUT IN JUNE



a body WITHOUT FUR

TRACIE WELSER

ELI

When I see the Terran woman's blood, I understand that they are like us. I watch as it seeps into the snow bank. It streams brightly, red against white, from the gashes in her throat and side. The blood soaks the front of the blue uniform underneath the torn, shiny snowsuit. I stand away and watch, respectfully.

Her companions shout her name, press their gloves in the blood as if their small hands can stop its persistent flow. The older one shouts words I don't understand. The other female pulls off her hood and goggles, then screams vaguely in my direction, as though I am to blame. Another male, the tall one, shouts up to the sky, calling out the name of the earth deity. The deity does not appear.

They have traveled far away from their star, their dead world, and their god.

THE STORYARTIST

The Terran Visitors have been here for eleven revolutions. Their bodies have little hair, and they wear many layers of clothing lined with something like fur, as we do, but in greater quantity. The Elders of the warrens have decided that they are snow-blinded, or "crazy," as Louis interprets. Among them, only Louis comes in from the cold. The others build huts on the ice plains. They stay out even through the dark days. Louis says they have machines that provide warmth. He gifted our

Elder with such a machine, which the Elder finds amusing. He dries his supplicants' shoes on it, just inside the warren door. Snow melts around the machine, and the *chi-choos* lick it up.

The behavior of the Terran Louis entertains us. The children, especially, laugh at Louis and his trinkets, his make-work machines. He spends his time talking to the children, asking "What is the use of this item?" or "What word do you say on this occasion?" and other nonsense. The children play his game and learn his words. He talks to his machines, and they talk back to him. He says this is his work, questions and words. Warren families invite him to share their tables, and he entertains the children by making ordinary stones appear from behind their ears. While our women whisper, I laugh loudest at this trick; this is not Art like mine, I say, but artifice. We like Louis even though he is a fool, and a lovesick one at that. His sorrow over the woman causes us pain.

NICHOLLS

By the central computer's reckoning, we have lived here on Ice for ten years now, and I still can't get used to the blasted weather. My grandfather's father was a naval serviceman, and he used to tell me stories about his dad's service in the Northeast Territories on Terra, after the war. He said the sky was gray and snowing the dirty snow all the time, and even if there was a dry day, it was dark and the wind blew so hard it cut to the bone. Even though I never saw Terra, that's what this place looks like,



I think. If I go outside the domes, away from the artificial lights and heat, I instantly feel depressed by the dismal look of things. And after a few minutes, the cold creeps in through the thermal suit.

The crew members are weary, too. I can see it on their faces. I don't let the rest of them, especially Ann-Marie, know how much it gets to me. Never thought I'd say that after so many years in transit. I used to complain that I'd go crazy if I had to spend another three-year shift looking at the walls of that survey ship, but stasis is just as bad. Now I'm so tired of this planet I'd welcome either.

Descriptions in manuals and training exercises can't convey the sensations you experience in stasis, especially the bad ones you feel as the wake cycle begins. Some people feel nothing at all, and wake up suddenly feeling like they've just had a short, dreamless nap. But me, I do dream, and wake up with my head screaming. Last time, I dreamed that the *Perelandra* began nosediving through the atmosphere of Ice, and I was the only crew member awake. I tried to wake up Sheila, but the cycle wouldn't initiate. The green button on the sleep chamber just kept flashing, and the controls wouldn't respond. I couldn't understand why everyone would have cycled into stasis at the same time. Then I ran to the viewing port and stared out at the planet roaring up to meet us. I had that dream over and over.

Today, I sent Kerensa, Ann-Marie, Mackenzie and Hawkins to the south sector for core samples, and they took Eli with them. They seemed eager to get out. Cabin fever, Ann-Marie

says. The completion of the north sector surveys put us back on schedule after the last freeze cycle delayed us. I told Hawkins we couldn't work through the extreme temperatures, especially not when it lasts fifty-two days. Guess he'll listen next time, if he doesn't want to lose another toe to frostbite. Compared to that, today's weather feels like summer at thirty below.

LOUIS

They call themselves the People, and call us the Visitors, or it might mean "off-worlders." I'm still trying to work out the context linguistically, and that's challenging because I'm gathering data from the children right now. The adults are less patient and would rather go on with their work. They're a people of few words, quite literally. They don't see the point in stating a fact more than once, let alone explain it to me over and over, and the brief back-and-forth of their conversation seems largely composed of short, ritual phrases and responses. So I just listen. Their reticence is apparently a cultural constant. They don't have names in the usual way, or give their children names, which was hard to get used to. But in the structure of their society, this makes some sense. The underground warrens they inhabit have housed the same families for generations, and each warren in the valley serves a function within the community that is relatively unchanging.

For instance, the Maker household, which at present houses seven members, weaves and braids various items for the community. The Older Maker, as she is known, wove a new strap for my data recorder case. Younger Maker, but not the Youngest who is a newborn, delivered it to me where I stay in the Hermit house. His large eyes were wary, but his furry hands, larger than mine even though he is a child, were deft and confident in his craft of Making. He rapidly secured the strap onto the metal hoop where the original strap had fastened, then with a mumbled version of ritual parting, averted his eyes and darted out through the door-flap. That's pretty much the extent of my experience with the Maker family. In the time I've lived here among the People, I've also met the Carvers, the Tanners, the Elder, and the Storyartist, to name a few. Of course, these are my names for them, translated with my understanding of their language and vocation. So far, the Storyartist and the Elder are the only people here other than the children interested in talking with me at any length.

"Your person, body, is without fur," says the Storyartist, in his language full of soft hisses and ending with a click of the tongue, indicating invitation to further talk on the topic. His lips, thin and pale pink against his gray facial fur, pull back in a smile that looks a bit like a human grimace.

"Is it *kershtk*, 'wrong-to-see'?" I ask, glancing at my bare arms. I make a mental note, having left the data recorder at the Hermit house. My list of *kershtk* is short, but includes taboos such as witnessing a non-family individual in the act of defecation (although family members are fine), walking on items made from *sotashel* skin which they consider holy, and human-like taboos involving sexual relations within the family.

"You are always talking with your eyes on the words, instead of your ears, Louis," the Storyartist says with a chuckle like a hoot. "Is that the meaning of your name, word collector?"

"No, it was the name of my father, my parent," I reply. "I think it means 'warrior.'"

"You think it true, but do not know?" He hoots again, and stands to secure the door-flap, blown open by a light wind.

"You did not answer my question, which you invited," I answer, folding my arms against the chill. A ritual phrase, often repeated to children.

"And so I will," he replies, phrasing the expected response with a wide grimace, and returning to the padded cushion we share near the cookpot. "It is not *kershtk*, but pitiable, like the hungry *chi-choo's* cry at the door. I resist the urge to clothe you." Hoot, hoot.

In this way, I have been told that I look naked to them, even with my uniform on, because my face and neck are bare, and they know I have very little "fur" elsewhere. Not naked in an obscene way as one might imagine, but in a worm-like fashion they find both fascinating and repellent. They are by comparison tall and hairy, with large hands and feet. The faces are curiously human in appearance but for the large golden eyes.

NICHOLLS

Kerensa enters the common area of the dome, and an icy blast of wind follows her in. I'm making coffee with the last of the surface rations. It takes her several minutes to peel down enough outer layers to be recognizable, but since there are only two women on the survey crew, I know it's her. Her walk is brisk and business-like, unlike Ann-Marie's casual stride. Her dark face is flushed in the stuffy, recirculating air of the dome, and her dark, kinky hair, usually well-kept and pulled back, is loose and tangled.

"Survey report?" I ask.

"Hawkins and Mackenzie are bringing the body up," Kerensa says. Tears spring to her eyes. "There's been an accident."

"We were supposed to be outside the hunting grounds!" Hawkins shouts.

"You believe that, sir?" Mackenzie says, red-faced and angry. "You trust that stupid chimp?"

"Mackenzie! Don't call him that!" Kerensa is crying.

"He just stood there while it attacked her, he didn't even try to help us," Mackenzie says.

"Wait, wait a minute," I say. "Everyone stop yelling at once, so I can hear your report. Where is Eli, anyway?"

"After the *sotashel* attacked, he just stood there staring while Ann-Marie bled to death," says Mackenzie. He paced back and forth across the common room.

"Where is he now?" I ask again. My hands are shaking as I pour another cup of coffee, this time with a shot of brandy.

"He ran back to the warren, I think," says Kerensa in a small voice. "In the direction of the warren."

"Good riddance," says Mackenzie. "Dumb freak." He scowls and kicks at the waste bin. It falls over with a clatter, empty.

"And the snow-beast, what do you call it, the *sotashel*?" I ask.

"I don't know," says Hawkins. "Everything happened so fast." He sits down on a supply crate with his head in his hands. The front of his snowsuit is crimson with Ann-Marie's blood. All of them are, and their gloves, in a little pile by the door.

"It was huge, like a really large polar bear standing on two legs," Kerensa says.

"I hit it with the core-sampler," Mackenzie says. "It dropped her and bolted."

"Right," says Hawkins. "Now, the sampler's broken."

"For pity's sake, sir!" sobs Kerensa, talking to Hawkins but staring at me.

"It would have torn her to pieces," says Mackenzie, quiet now.

They all get quiet.

"Bring her inside," I say.

ELI

The Visitors call me Eli, and I like it. It feels odd when they say it, such as when they are calling me on their talk-box to come and see something, or to ask me another question, about the best way around the mountain or about the weather cycle. But I like it because it is a word to fit my new life. I am no longer Younger Stone-shaper. I don't do that anymore. I imagine that "E" means "talk" and "Li" means "listen". I talk and listen now, and show, instead of shaping stone. In this way, I am like the Older Storyartist, except he talks of old times and stories, and makes the People gasp with amazement with his Art. I tell about the land, which the People already know of and need no telling, but to the Visitors it is very important. Now I help them make maps by talking and showing, and I listen with them about where they come from.

The one I talk with on many occasions, they call him Sir or Captain or Nicholls, or sometimes two names at the same time. The names mean something like Elder in our language because he commands, and they obey his wisdom. He tells me that the place they come from is far from here, so far they had to fly in a metal container and sleep for the journey, like hibernating *chi-choos* covered in dry mud. Last revolution, the new one, Mackenzie, woke up and came down from the big ship, and Fletcher went back up. Fletcher had an open face, but Mackenzie does not. It is strange to think of beings, like us, moving through the net of stars. Of course, Older Stone-shaper says they are not like us at all.

The home of the Visitors is called Earth, or Terra. This is another example of their strange and frustrating habit of giving more than one word to each thing. Earth is also a cold place, but not because of a dimming sun. It was once green and warm, just as Storyartist tells of our home long ago, but some of the beings there fought one another and damaged their world with strong weapons. Now it's always winter there, and most of the people live in metal containers among the stars and in domes like the ones they brought here. They hurt Earth, so it turned its face aside, like our sun turns aside from us.

Today, the *sotashel* walked among them. I was there, and I saw their blood, red like ours.

LOUIS

"Among the Visitors, there are few females," says the Storyartist, clicking his tongue.

"Yes, now there is one female left on the survey crew, plus the pilot on the ship in orbit," I reply. We are grinding *geharr*

together, a thick green paste made from lichen that grows on the warm warren walls, in damp places. He knows I grieve, and he has waited several days before inviting discussion.

"Pilot? What means this name?" The golden eyes of the Storyartist flick up to my face and down again to the earthen bowl in his long fingers.

"The one who steers the sled, the ship," I say. "But her name, the one her parents gave her, is Sheila Dunham."

"The sled." He hoots a little. "Sky-sleds, space-people, parent naming." He flaps a hand, stained green with *geharr* paste, a gesture akin to shaking the head. "Terrans are not satisfied, it seems, to remain in place but wander like *sotashel* from valley to valley. The People, we always remain, letting wonders, and wanderers, come to us."

"Perhaps you will fly in a ship, go to a new valley, before the sun finally dies," I say, half-joking, emphasizing with a hoot.

The Storyartist drops his bowl with a clatter. His lips are pulled back to show his long teeth.

"Your dissatisfaction is not shared by the People," he says in a rough voice.

There is a moment of silence between us, then I bow my head in apology. "I speak as a rude child, Storyartist."

"Yes, that is your way of speaking in this moment," he says quietly, in acceptance of my apology. After a moment, he returns to the bowl of *geharr*, scraping with a stone scoop. For several minutes, there is only the sound of the wind outside the doorflap, and the rhythmic scraping of the scoop on his bowl. I join in with my own bowl, the crisp lichen blending smoothly into fragrant paste.

"Louis," says the Storyartist. He keeps his eyes on the bowl, but he speaks my name in a deeper register than usual, the one reserved for story-telling before his People.

"I listen." A polite response.

"When the People first began telling their story, the valley was green. The hills were green. Even the plains between valleys where the wind howls were green, just as this *geharr* is green." He gestures with a long, furry, stained finger.

"Yes," I say, responsively, in the way of the listener. This part of the story is familiar, as it is often the preface of tales.

"We lived in green ways, and there were plants both short and tall. Many small animals gave us their meat and companionship, not only *chi-choos*. And many of the People were warriors to protect the plains. Warren fought warren."

"Yes," I say again.

"Now, the sun turns its face aside." He illustrates with a hand gesture. "Tribes live apart in the warrens, and we trade for goods and meet for the hunt and pairing. There is nothing more to fight over."

"Yes."

I look down at my hands, speckled with *geharr*, and think of Ann-Marie.

"The sun dims and will die," the Storyteller is saying. "This we have known. As the sun dies, the People die. We are satisfied." He grunts, showing that the story is over, then turns back to the *geharr*. "Smooth enough?" he says in an everyday voice, pointing two long fingers at my bowl.

"You have enlightened me," I say, in ritual thanks for the story. "And yes."

NICHOLLS

Her body is frozen now. After they bring her into the common room, I sit with her a while, looking at her white face. A thin layer of frost coats her lips and her eyelashes, and it begins to melt after only a few minutes. I have the absurd thought that she will wake when she thaws and give me an attitude about it.

I have Hawkins come and help me move the body back outside after that. It exudes a musky animal smell, even while frozen. Dusk is falling, and we cover it with a tarp with the plan of burying her in the morning.

"Should we radio the ship and tell Sheila and Fletcher?" Hawkins stomps snow off his boots, then takes them off and tosses them in the corner.

"I guess we should let them know. Maybe they'll want to come down for a memorial of some kind."

"We should tell Louis."

"He'll find out, when Eli gets back to the warren."

I kick the portable heater up a notch, and we both move in a little closer to the glowing element. We both sit, just staring at the rippling heat waves moving above the heater.

Hawkins laughs suddenly. "I sure am going to miss the way she cooked those powdered eggs."

"Yeah," I say, smiling a little.

"It's okay to say you miss her." Hawkins tries to meet my eye.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just that you haven't even cried."

"You want me in here bawling like Kerensa?" I look him in the eye then.

"No, Captain."

"Don't call me that right now. Just get out that bottle of hooch that Mackenzie brewed up, alright? And bring a clean cup."

A little while after that, we both cry some. Kerensa comes in from the back dome, the one we call the Steamer, where she's washed up and changed.

"Oh, she still had it for you, sir," Kerensa says. She sits on Hawkins' lap, lucky devil, and drinks hooch out of his plastic cup.

"Shit." I shift in my seat too quickly and spill half my drink on the concrete floor.

"She told me she wanted to take you back," she smiles, shaking her head, and Hawkins reaches over to refill my cup. I think of Ann-Marie's eyes, moist and brown, a few years back when we said some made-up vows on the bridge of the *Perelandra*. I try not to think of her, frozen under the tarp outside.

I shake my head.

"I remember all the yelling," says Hawkins.

"I was going to go in with her, into cryo, just like always, and that left Fletcher, Sheila, you and Louis up to run the last leg to planetfall. I guess she was tired of looking at me, and wanted to switch with Sheila."

"And that was the end of that," says Hawkins. He stands up, unseating Kerensa abruptly. "I'm going to take a leak."

"I figured it was because of Louis, but I never asked." I finish off the cup, and sit back with my feet up on a crate, near the heater. Kerensa hums a song, one that was popular years ago, and busies herself with the cups and a few dishes that were on the cook stove. I hum along for a while.

"She still loved you, Jim," she says, taking my cup. Just then, Hawkins comes back from the Steamer.

"Mackenzie's gone," he says.

Footprints in the snow lead north, back out to the plains.

THE STORYARTIST

Early in his visit here, the Terran Louis visited the Elder and offered him gifts. Together, we visit the Elder often, in spite of the fact that the Elder does not care for his foolish company.

"The Visitor wishes to learn about the trading of the People, of the other warrens," I say to the Elder at his doorflap. A hairy *chi-choo* dances around our legs.

"Let him come," the Elder says after a long moment, looking at Louis' strange clothing and ugly face. "But you will tell of it."

We sit together, and I tell Louis of the ten warrens, and the tale of the eleventh, the ones who died when their mountain warren collapsed. We meet and trade with our closest neighbor, twice now since the arrival of the Visitors. We met, I tell him, first to discuss the presence of the strangers and then to plan the next Hunt.

"I wish to know about the Hunt," Louis says. He scratches the ears of the *chi-choo* at his feet.

"Much of what you see comes from the Hunt," the Elder says. "Except for your gift of the off-world heating device."

The Elder smirks, a look that Louis seems not to see. We follow the Elder's gesture around the room, where wall hangings and cushions made of *sotashel* skins, and shoes and other items made of brown *chi-choo* leathers can be seen. Above the door, a walking stick hangs, made of one long bone decorated with strips of hide strung with ornate clay beads, *sotashel* claws and pointed teeth.

"You rely on the Hunt, then, for food and tools."

Always, Louis is speaking like a child, asking for "yes".

"Older Storyartist told me that you are a fool," the Elder says, "but I see you are a new child in the cold world."

"You honor me," Louis says. He touches his talk-box, which he carries everywhere. We ignore his interruption.

"The hunt happens every other revolution. Best men of the warren meet the closest-tribe men, in the hunting ground on the plains between the valleys."

"When the sun is brightest," Louis says, seeking confirmation.

"When the sun is brightest, we will meet. The *sotashel* walks then, and we draw it nearer with our offerings. In exchange for our gifts, it offers itself." The *chi-choo* whines a little. Elder scoops it up and strokes it on his lap.

"An honorable death," Louis says.

"What means 'honor,' the word you speak?"

"Um, a good act, with right thought."

"It is more than good or right." The Elder thinks for a moment on this distinction. "It is a sacred act, of giving. The *sotashel* gives, as the sun gives. Without them, we die."

"The gifts of the People are sacred, also," Louis says, a question disguised as confirmation.

"Yes, you speak rightly," I say. "We give a sacred gift."

He asks to see the gift the People give, and seems surprised when he sees it. Putting down the *chi-choo*, the Elder leads him

through the doorflap at the rear of his greeting room, down a hallway past several other doors, and into the temple. In an alcove carved into the rock sit the ritual jars and sacred rattles.

The Elder opens a jar, highly decorated by the Maker with painted pictures. Hunters spear the *sotashel*, who towers over the hunters with a ferocious aspect.

"This is the gift," I say. I show him the contents of the jar, and he wrinkles his broad nose slightly at the repellent odor.

"These gifts draw the *sotashel*," Louis says. His tone is reverent. "They're small."

"They are the scent of the female *sotashel*," I say, sensing a question. "She nests in the northern valleys while the males wander."

NICHOLLS

We wait for Mackenzie in shifts through the night. Hawkins wants to go after him, but I'm not inclined to risk anyone else out on the plains, especially if Mackenzie is out hunting for the snow-beast, like I think he is.

"He's a hothead, a stupid risk-taker," Hawkins says. "He deals with things differently, not always good."

"He was angry," I say.

"That's how some people handle it."

"Well, there was nothing you could have done, Hawkins. It just happened."

"Yeah." He rubs his eyes and shrugs. "It went straight for her. Just her."

THE STORYARTIST

"Among the Terrans, there are few females now," I say to Louis. We sit together in the Hermit house where he stays. I sip a hot drink Louis has made in one of his little machines and watch while he struggles to mend his own clothing with sticky squares of cloth.

"I invite your question," Louis says, in a weary way that I decline to notice. He is accustomed to being the questioner.

"Have the other Terran females chosen partners for pairing?" I swirl a finger idly in the little cup.

"No, they have not."

"If they have not chosen, then you may yet find another."

Louis does not meet my eye. "These females may choose not to."

"Choose not to choose? Ah. There are women among the People who choose that life. At the time of pairing, they go to live at the other warrens, as Hermits or apprentices. Sometimes they stay."

"I guess you could say these women are like that." He concentrates on the ridiculous patch, which has adhered to his right thumb.

LOUIS

"Sometimes there is a sad one at the pairing," says the Storyartist. "He desires one who will not choose him." His golden eyes watch me closely. I sigh and put down the torn snowsuit.

"Storyartist, will you hear this?"

"I listen."

"Some of the others in the warren call you he-who-tells-truth-and-hears-lies."

He smiles, a sly turning up at the corner of his mouth that exposes a canine-like tooth. "Would you speak truth or lies to me, Louis-warrior?"

I turn aside and pause, considering, for a few moments. I can feel his round eyes studying me.

"I would refrain from speaking in this moment." Another children's phrase, but a useful one for saving face.

NICHOLLS

In the early morning, Mackenzie still isn't back. We begin packing up to go look for him, arming the crew as best we can with laser cutters and drills. We've just radioed up to Sheila to update her on the situation when Eli jogs up. We hear his footfalls before we see him in the dim, illuminated by the dome lights. He's wearing a Terran snowsuit jacket, Kerensa's extra shed given him, and furry native leggings.

"Eli!" Kerensa shouts. "You're okay! You came back." She runs to him, and throws her arms around his spindly neck.

He grins in that awful way they do, all teeth and gums like a snarl.

"I bring news you must hear," Eli says, and draws up a breath to begin.

"I bring this news," said a voice, from behind Eli through the dim. "I am the Storyartist, and I will tell the tale." A native comes out of the darkness, tall, thin, with a face that's handsome in an alien way, and graying brown fur around his temples and jowls almost like sideburns.

Hawkins makes him coffee.

"Hunters seek the *sotashel* now," the native says. His English is surprisingly good.

"One of my men has gone out alone, we think to do the same," I say.

"You think but do not know?" He clucks his tongue in an odd way.

"Will they kill it?" I ask. "It killed one of my crew."

"They do not hunt it, but drive it away until the hunting time," says the Storyartist, waving his free hand. "But that is not why I come."

"The *sotashel* is not to blame for the death of Ann-Marie," says Eli eagerly, but a look from the Storyartist makes it obvious that Eli is speaking out of turn.

"What?" says Hawkins. He stands up. "I watched it tear her apart, right in front of us."

"Eli, you saw it, too," Kerensa says, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"That is not his name," says the Storyartist, with a stern look at both her and Eli. Cowed, they grow quiet.

"Please, explain," I say.

"I will tell of this," says the Storyartist. "The Visitor Louis came to the warren four revolutions past. He brought his talk-box, and he stayed in Hermit house."

"Yes, we know," I say.

"Good," says the Storyartist. He sips the coffee and makes a blowing sound, as though he's burned his tongue. "Five days

past, Louis invited talk with the Elder about the hunt. He knows of the gifts we offer the *sotashel*."

"What gifts?" I ask. "Forgive my ignorance, but I don't understand."

The Storyartist cocks his head to one side, cutting his eyes at Eli.

"They are all as children here," says Eli with a little grimace.

"The gifts used to draw the *sotashel* during the hunt," says the Storyartist. "One is gone, the new one set aside for the next hunt. Louis took it."

"Why would Louis..." starts Kerensa. Then she says quietly, "Oh."

"I'm sorry, but I still don't understand," Hawkins says.

"She didn't choose him," says the Storyartist.

Mackenzie never came back. The natives are certain that the snow-beast has taken him, especially if he carried Ann-Marie's pack. They examine her body and confirm that the scent of the drawing substance, like a pheromone or musk, is on her clothing. They offer to bury her in their way and with a special ceremony that speaks of her as a brave hunter. They can't seem to grasp that the only thing she ever hunted for was ore. She was a brave pilot, though.

After a brief conference in their chattering, clucking language, the Storyartist agrees to allow Eli to remain with us for the next year until the survey is completed.

"Eli is his new name, he is no longer a Stone-shaper," he announces. Then they both go back to the warren. The Storyartist assures us that he will return with Louis, and that Louis will give himself up without a fight.

"He is a word-collector, not a warrior," he says with a sad look.

LOUIS

"What will happen when you return to them?" the Storyartist asks.

"You ask too many questions, Storyartist," I reply. "I have been a bad influence on you." I pack the data recorder in its hard plastic case, and fasten the strap, the one woven for me by the Older Maker.

"You did not answer my question, which your actions invite," he says. The expression on his furry face is unreadable. "When you speak truth to them, what will they do?"

After a pause, I say, "I think they will put me in stasis, the sleep machine. At least, I hope they will." I zip up my pack, the one I brought with me so long ago from the ship.

"No more wandering for Louis," says the Storyartist. He pats me on the shoulder then, a human gesture.

"No," I say, finally. "I'm satisfied."

Tracie Welser is an instructor of developmental writing and Women's Studies. She's also a science fiction writer, a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop class of 2010, and a narrator for Starship Sofa, as well as contributor to The Future Fire Editors' Blog and #FeministSF chat (Sundays on Twitter). She's a big fan of teaching and learning as tools of empowerment. She might be obsessed with owls, drumming, utopias and dystopias and stories about time travel. Tracie lives in southern California with her partner and fellow writer John Nakamura Remy.

BOOK ZONE

AFTER THE FALL, BEFORE THE FALL, DURING THE FALL

Nancy Kress

review and interview by
Mareesa Kinnaird Eppler

AN A TO Z OF THE FANTASTIC CITY

Hal Duncan

review by Jim Steel

BLUE REMEMBERED EARTH

Alastair Reynolds

review by Paul F. Carrington

THE COMPANY OF THE DEAD

David Kowalski

review by John Howard

TRANSMISSION

John Meaney

review by Elaine Gallagher

THE HEIR OF NIGHT

Helen Lowe

review by Ian Hughes

THE GAME IS ALTERED

Mez Packer

review by Nick Deighton

THE NOT YET

Moir Crone

review by Stephen Thomas

JANE CARVER OF WAAR

Nathan Long

review by Stephen Thomas

AFTER THE FALL, BEFORE THE FALL, DURING THE FALL

Nancy Kress

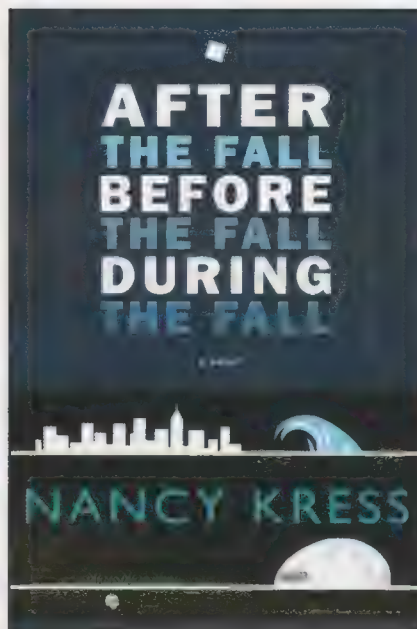
Tachyon Publications, 192pp, \$14.95 tpb

Daily life shows us over and over that there is no such thing as a reliable, infallible witness. Ten different people may see the same event but they will interpret it in very different ways. Critically, they will read it through a set of filters based on their own knowledge and understanding of the world. The event itself remains beyond their perceptions, glimpsed but at best only partially understood and therefore open to misinterpretation. This inherent failure of understanding lies at the heart of Nancy Kress' latest short novel.

The title may seem cumbersome but it captures not only the essential nature of the story but also something of the rhythm of its telling as three strands of plot drawn from either side of a cataclysm are braided

together more and more tightly until the catastrophe itself is revealed. However, to begin with, the precise nature of this disaster is unclear, although the Survivors themselves blame mysterious beings they call the Tesslies (this because they appear in a shower of sparks). Although the Tesslies rescued the Survivors and placed them in a large, mysterious building the Survivors call the Shell, they have for the most part left the Survivors to get on with their lives. The Tesslies are rarely seen and their motives are inscrutable.

The community has struggled to survive and its long-term prospects are not good. Although children have been born to the original Survivors, they have proved to be sickly. Few have survived to adolescence and not all of them are fertile. There is deep concern as to whether the community can have any long-term viability given it is so small. Its material and intellectual resources are pitifully few, and it is difficult to imagine what the group might usefully



Nancy Kress is the author of sixteen SF novels, three fantasy novels and four short-story collections. She has won four Nebula Awards, and two Hugos for Best Novella, for 'The Erdmann Nexus' and for what is undoubtedly her best-known story, 'Beggars in Spain', later expanded into the novel of the same name. Recently, Ms Kress kindly agreed to answer a few questions about her latest novel, *After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall*, from Tachyon Publications

achieve in the future, assuming it can ever leave the Shell. Nonetheless, McAllister, the group's de facto leader, is determined that the group, and humanity, will survive. The recent provision of the Grab mechanism has allowed the Survivors to travel into the past, where they steal food and other goods, but also children, girls in particular, in an effort to ensure the future prospects of the community. This poses particular moral questions for the reader; for the community members it is a purely pragmatic decision, given they already know that many will die in the events to come, so their actions are not so much theft as rescue.

Prior to the disaster, Julie Kahn, a brilliant mathematician, is working with the FBI, trying to make sense of a series of kidnappings. She has linked these with some bizarre thefts from retail stores and developed an algorithm to predict where the next event might occur in the hope of preventing them. However, it is

while working on a completely unrelated project that Julie, now with a baby of her own, realises that the natural world itself is under threat, something readers will already know, as they have watched bacteria mutate unnoticed in the roots of the world's plants and the earth itself shift in unusual ways. Believing herself to be in danger as a result of having this knowledge, Julie and her young daughter go on the run, heading towards the predicted site of the next theft.

We know of course that disaster will occur; much of the novel's fascination lies in watching how the various plotlines converge, to see how the events that, in 2035, are believed to have taken place in 2014 will actually turn out to have happened, and in particular to see how Julie will respond. Her algorithm can predict the next appearance of the Survivors but cannot interpret the rationale behind their actions, any more than the Survivors themselves understand the

actions of the Tesslies. By the same token, the Survivors' actions may seem perverse to outsiders although they know precisely what they're doing. Even explanations fail when given in the heat of the moment and mediated by people who have no context for what is being said.

Kress also offers a portrayal of the human will to survive, so strong and powerful that people will go to extraordinary lengths to secure a future, however flimsy its prospects might be, while also showing how such qualities emerge from a pragmatic engagement with ordinary life. Both Julie and McAllister are strong and thoughtful women, determined to do what the situation demands, no matter how difficult the decisions they have to make. This is a short novel that asks tough questions and offers no easy answers. The paring away of the text focuses the reader's attention with brutal intensity on the ethical and ecological issues that lie at this novel's heart.

Review & Interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller



Given the modern enthusiasm for 600-page novels, I'm struck by the comparative brevity of this novel, especially considering the complexity of its structure, and by the economy of your storytelling. Was it a conscious choice on your part to try for something more pared-down or was this the way the story demanded to be told?

This isn't actually a novel but rather a novella, at 38,200 words. That makes no difference unless somebody decides to nominate it for an award. Tachyon has been publishing stand-alone novellas for a while now: James Patrick Kelly's *Burn* and James Morrow's *Shambling Towards Hiroshima*. Jacob Weisman asked me to write one, which surprised me because I thought perhaps your name had to be "James" to qualify. Tachyon is billing it as a novel since, apparently, people are more likely to buy a novel than a novella. The writing is tight because I needed to bring in a complex story at under 40,000 words.

The novella is my favourite form to write, so I was glad to do that.

It's interesting that you say the novella is your favourite form to write, I know a lot of readers still feel that SF works better at shorter lengths despite the emphasis on the novel. Do you feel there particular things that short form SF can do that long form can't? Or that the shorter length can enable writers to do better? And do the students in your classes actively embrace the shorter forms or do they tend to regard them simply as a stepping-stone to writing and publishing at novel length?

The short form of any genre can deliver a strong punch at the end, the stronger for being delivered in (sometimes) one sitting to read the story. Novels, on the other hand, do better at creating an intricate, fully developed setting, especially important for off-world, far-future, or fantasy stories. Although some students

use the shorter forms as "practise" for eventual novels, I find that most writers naturally gravitate to one or the other, and are better at writing one or the other.

I was also interested in the way that you juxtaposed Julie's story, with its focus on the certainty of mathematics to predict the next Grab, with the situation in the Shell, where Grabs are affected by the randomness of, for example, a person falling asleep. You seem to be suggesting that despite Julie's brilliance and conviction algorithms can't account for everything.

That's exactly right. The physical universe may conform to mathematical laws, but human (or alien) behaviour does not. Also, the Grab may be activating according to some schedule based on Tesslie ideas of proper timing, which would be alien to us.

And as a follow-up to that, the Tesslies seem to be the most random element of

all, suddenly appearing, rescuing people but apparently then leaving them to figure things out for themselves. Would it be fair to say that the Tesslies don't really have a clear idea what to do about the humans?

No. What's fair is to say that we don't understand what the Tesslie ideas are about humans, except that they do seem to be trying a rescue of sorts after we've trashed the planet. Their actions may make perfect sense to them, given their culture – whatever it is. I really object to aliens in SF who act just like humans in funny suits.

Picking up on that, I wonder if you could say a little more about the problems of creating aliens when writing SF. It's visibly problematic in SF film and TV, with the assumption that aliens will mostly be variants on bipedal, air-breathing, carbonish-based life forms, but in fiction, how does one deal with the problem of conveying the ultimately unknowable in a way that can draw the reader into the alien experience without turning the aliens into disguised humans?

This is the innate problem of creating aliens – too much like us and their “alienness” disappears, too little like us and they become incomprehensible. Every writer looks for that balance where the aliens seem strange, acting from some half-glimpsed motives or logic that is not ours. One of the best examples of this is are Ted Chiang's heptapods in his ‘Story of Your Life’. Just breathtaking.

I am interested too that the imperative to repopulate the world seems to come from the Survivors themselves rather than something forced on them by the Tesslies. This is, of course, a long-standing theme in SF – if we near extinction, we must do everything and anything to repopulate. Species preservation is a strong instinct. Given the rather bizarre circumstances of the Shell, this is how I believe events would unfold. And McAllister is a strong enough leader to see that they do.

The third strand of the novel concerns what we might perhaps call Gaia's own attempt to rebalance the world. I was very struck here by the very short descriptions. US literature has a strong tradition of tradition of nature and science writing – Thoreau, Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, John McPhee all spring immediately to mind – and I wonder how

hard it was to convey the scientific facts about mutating bacteria and geological activity without losing the sense of factual content but without making the facts become dry as a result.

I really enjoyed researching and writing these sections. It seemed to me that the best way (which you've already noticed) is to keep such descriptions short. That's always a good idea with info dumps in fiction, of course, but is especially important when the necessary information is highly scientific and does not include any actual characters. Also, short descriptions (like short paragraphs or sentences) are more punchy. If you're going to blow up the Yellowstone Caldera, I say do it fast.

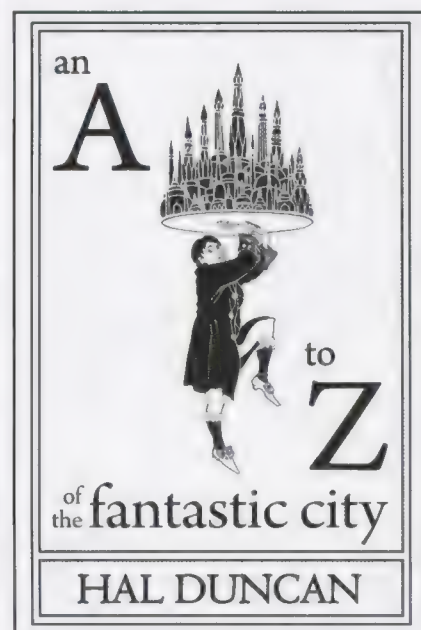
I wonder too how you see the future of our planet, given the current trend towards climate-change denial and a reluctance to take the necessary steps toward reducing carbon emissions. Do you think Gaia will act as a self-regulating mechanism or is the damage already done?

Heaven only knows. If Gaia doesn't, we'd better do it for her.

Finally, something I realise I forgot to ask about earlier: in Julie Kahn and McAllister, the focus is on two very determined women, one with a baby, one pregnant, both of them extremely competent and prepared to make difficult choices, pragmatic rather than emotional. I personally found this very refreshing given the current tendency for women characters in SF to be represented simply as “feisty”, “kick-ass” and gun-toting; I wondered if you had any more thoughts on the ways in which women are portrayed in SF.

“Feisty” and “kick-ass” are fine for young women soldiers, ninjas, assassins, explorers, CEOs, etc., but SF seems to forget that humanity contains other types of women as well. Mothers, for instance. SF is notably short on mothers. Yet the majority of females have at least one child some time in their lives. SF also lacks shy, “traditional” women, although I know several of these in real life. Neither Julie nor McAllister is shy, but neither are they gun-toting ass-kickers. They are trying to do the best they can for themselves and those that depend on them, given the peculiar circumstances that surround them. Not unlike most of us.

Nancy Kress, thank you very much.



AN A TO Z OF THE FANTASTIC CITY

Hal Duncan

Small Beer Press, 58pp, \$50 hb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

It does what it says: twenty-six cities, imaginary and real, arranged for your delectation. ‘Interzone’ is here, of course, in all of its Burroughsian danger and sensuality, although sadly there is no mention of its fine newspaper. There are also entries for Ambergris, Byzantium, Camelot, Dublin and so on. It is patently a love song to literature, which is something that will come as no surprise to fans of Duncan, but it wears his learning lightly and he dispenses it with his customary deft wit. The introduction, hilariously, is by a pompous Henry V. Duncan who manages to miss the point while dispensing dollops of theory.

Hal Duncan's approach to narrative structure has been described as cubist on more than one occasion and here he plays directly with the critics and the notion in ‘Guernica’, which also returns him to his exploration of Fascism and the Spanish Civil War. In this city Picasso is Franco's architect for a Utopian dream that turns to horror. ‘Metropolis’ grabs this theme and extends it, creating a comic book Overman hero and a new Futurist ideology for a different America. Those entries are notable for drawing their influence from the visual arts, and as such are hardly typical. Not for nothing is the book subtitled ‘A Guide

for Readers and Explorers.' It is mostly the written word that provides the inspiration for the guide. Yeats, Durrell, Lovecraft, Delany, Moorcock and many others – the references are overt and seemingly endless, and all the texts are assumed to be fine examples of veracity. Sometimes we are just tossed a name and our imagination fills in the rest, while on other occasions we are presented with quotes. The entry for 'Washington' is two-thirds Dickens, with Duncan merely framing and contextualising the Victorian's words. More often than not, though, it is Duncan's imagination that illuminates the streets.

This is not a major work and I doubt it is intended to be regarded as such. It is a confection to stave off our hunger while Duncan works on his next big thing. Even so, it is a weightier and more worthwhile project than what is normally offered up to us by most of the others working in the field today. What this beautifully produced chapbook also does is provide an accessible introduction to Duncan for those who may have balked at the *Vellum/Ink* diptych. The brief entries can even be dipped into at random, for this is a functional guidebook for the armchair traveller even if he can never visit the cities in person. Duncan's 'Dublin', for example, is Joyce's Dublin with a twist. It has been (post)modernised for the twenty-first century. Are there's a mention of Yeats and Byzantium in the Dublin entry, so we turn back to check on the entry for Byzantium again. Browsing and exploring. For those who crave more of *Vellum* there are encounters with several of its characters. Jack Flash frequents the streets of Interzone, unsurprisingly, and there are others. Hal Duncan himself also wanders through many of the cities as a fictional traveller, albeit one who drifts towards autobiography on several occasions. The entry for 'Provan', Alasdair Gray's mundane Glasgow from *Lanark*, provides us with a fine example of this since Glasgow also happens to be Duncan's home city. Gray himself pops up, fittingly, just as he did in *Lanark*.

Mention too must be made of Eric Schaller's illustrated chapter headings which take us on their own subtle (but in this case linear) narrative, and his full page illustrations that borrow from Brueghel's 'Tower of Babel' and add new metaphorical layers to it. This is a very handsome volume indeed and it should be noted that there is also a \$10 paperback edition available for those who are afflicted in these double-dip days.



BLUE REMEMBERED EARTH

Alastair Reynolds

Gollancz, 505pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

It's not often that you come across a hero called Geoffrey. It just sounds a tad too acquiescent. With profuse and genuine apologies to any real-life Geoffreys reading this, it's fair to say that Geoffrey Akinya – central character of this novel – isn't one to challenge this assertion.

We're in the middle of the 22nd century. In an interesting twist to much existing futurism, Reynolds opts for Africa having become the world's dominant technological and economic power, part of a largely land-based alliance of new nations in which the use of biotechnology has made poverty, crime, war and disease history. Humanity, augmented by ever-watchful technology, has even begun to spread out across the solar system, largely on the back of the Akinya family's now vast business empire.

At the start of the novel, our hero Geoffrey Akinya has turned his back on the family business, instead focusing on studying the mental states of the elephants living within the Amboseli basin. However, when his grandmother, Eunice – the Akinya family's matriarch and effective business founder – dies, unexpected consequences look set to change not just his life but potentially those of millions of people across the solar system.

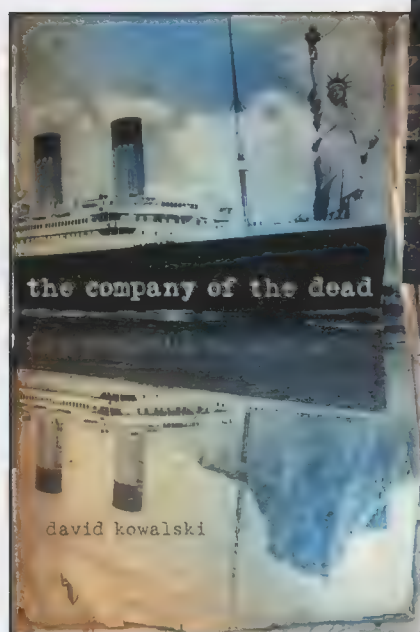
Unlike Reynolds' previous galaxy-spanning space-operas, *Blue Remembered*

Earth is contained within a much smaller area, at least cosmically speaking. Mars is about the limit we reach, even if some of the characters rightfully describe the red planet as a mere "skip and a hop" away. Yet what the novel might lack in sheer scale it more than makes up for in its creation of a believable, and in many respects admirable, world of augmented humans taking their first steps onto an interstellar stage. In such a context, having an emotionally-paralysed hero like Geoffrey Akinya – things happen to Geoffrey, rather than him being a protagonist who, well, "protags" – gives room for this world to flourish in the reader's imagination without distraction.

That said, such is Reynolds' interest in his new global world that he, and therefore the reader, can sometimes forget the more intimate details, not least that Geoffrey and his family supposedly come from Kenyan-Tanzanian stock. Equally, there is remarkably little self-description or much to distinguish Geoffrey from his equally rebellious sister Sunday, who becomes the novel's secondary point of view character. Many of the other characters, such as Geoffrey's ex Jumai or Sunday's boyfriend Jitendra, never quite seem to burst into life beyond their narrative functions as useful companions. Perhaps this is down to them not actually being blood members of the Akinya family. At heart, this is a family saga after all, albeit one mapped onto a quest structure for a mysterious secret that could potentially bring down all their worlds.

Reynolds is certainly adept at portraying the potentially complicated connections and underlying conflicts between members of such a rich, powerful family. Yet this and the novel's grounded world-building are not sufficient, in themselves, to explain how Reynolds is so successful in holding your attention, despite this being a novel where seemingly not much of note happens in its opening third. A factor is certainly the novel's seemingly unfashionable optimism; we're presented with a hopeful world that's flourishing after the 21st century Anthropocene, when climate change almost pushed humanity to the brink of extinction. But, ultimately, it's just down to good writing.

While coming to a satisfying conclusion, *Blue Remembered Earth* leaves sufficient loose ends to confirm its place as the beginning of Reynolds' new Poseidon's Children series. Undoubtedly a slow-burner, but this is an intelligent, thought-provoking novel that, like its hero Geoffrey, eventually reveals its hidden strengths.



THE COMPANY OF THE DEAD

David Kowalski

Titan Books, 832pp, £8.99 tpb

Reviewed by John Howard

Titans abound in *The Company of the Dead*. And not only in the publisher's name, but in the very Jonbar Hinge from which all doors open in this titan romp of a novel: the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* on its maiden voyage in April 1912. Jonathan Wells is on board the doomed giant ship, and determined to ensure that the fateful encounter with the iceberg never takes place.

One hundred years later, a replica *Titanic* sails safely and triumphantly into port at New York, completing the circle that had been so catastrophically shattered before. The leisurely voyage from Europe has also been the setting for talks designed to make peace between a vastly enlarged Japanese Empire and Russia; Japan and the German Empire have divided most of the world between them with occupied areas and spheres of influence. The United States has disappeared, a second Secession having taken place, with the resulting Union and Confederacy maintaining an uneasy peace on a Japanese-dominated continent, a situation superficially reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

The political titans are mainly kept off-stage – except, vitally, for Joseph (but not *the* Joseph) Kennedy (whose family inevitably forms a freewheeling quasi-royal dynasty with many fingers in many



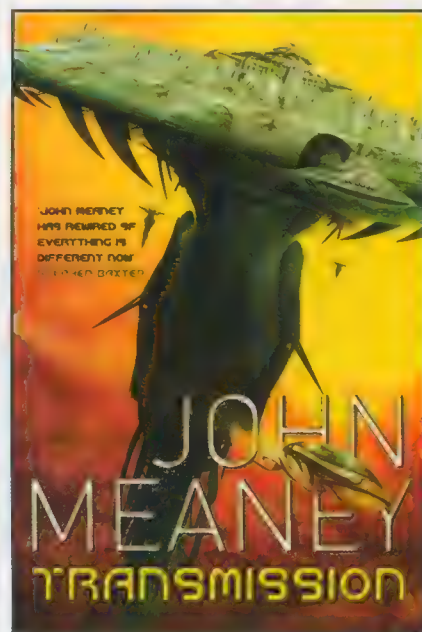
a small stage-setting magnified by its isolation, and the scene for the creakings-open or slammings-shut of history's hatches to reveal the branching corridors, different paths, and multitude of various rooms stretching out, beyond.

All sorts of events flash up and swish past like signs along a motorway. Yet while we may start out at a definite time and place and journey towards a clearly-imagined destination, the signs change and drift as we go, and the destination becomes uncertain. Back seat drivers and roadworks along the timestream highway constantly threaten to wear out the map and tear it apart. For if Wells saves the *Titanic*, or at least enables more of its passengers to be rescued, the consequences ripple out unpredictably – as science fiction readers will already know.

The action is fast-moving and varied, crossing borders in chase and pursuit, shuffling the decks and playing the cards of various histories' outcomes with a joyful (if often violent) abandon. Apparently incidentally (but it's fitted in) another event is invoked – perhaps the one allegedly behind the most popular conspiracy theory of all – and its location becomes the second focus at where histories will spring into being (or not). Strategically placed hints are redeemed throughout the novel, especially as it hurtles towards its conclusion, with Wells, Kennedy, and certain others returning to the *Titanic* for what they hope will be a final resolution.

The Company of the Dead is like an iceberg, the vast majority of which starts as hidden, but somehow gradually rises up out of the depths, exposing more of itself, bringing more surface to the fitful light. After all, the novel is proclaimed as the "secret history" of the twentieth century. *The Company of the Dead* is David Kowalski's first work of fiction, according to the website. What a start. His novel sprawls, it's all over the place, it lacks discipline, but Kowalski makes these potential vices into definite virtues. All is forgiven, or can be. Sit back and enjoy the voyage(s).

pies, and seeking to influence many events). And the location of the *Titanic*, whether saved or not as the carrier of some who will survive, or those who need to in order to bring about the Empire-laden world of 2012, is always waiting:



TRANSMISSION

John Meaney

Gollancz, 422pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Elaine Gallagher

Trilogies appear to be a standard form of SF and fantasy story, ever since *The Lord of the Rings* and possibly before. Some trilogies, like John Christopher's *Tripods* stories, are a sequence of self-contained stories with a connecting theme or story arc. Others, like *The Lord of the Rings* itself, are better regarded as a single novel serialised in three volumes. John Meaney's *Ragnarok* trilogy is one of the latter. *Transmission*, the second volume, follows directly on from *Absorption* and while there is a certain amount of filling in of information from the previous volume, it is limited to the level of "previously on..." introductions in TV series. If you have not read *Absorption* or if, like myself, you read it some time ago and the details did not stick in your memory, then *Transmission* will lose a lot of its impact.

The *Ragnarok* trilogy is set in the universe of *To Hold Infinity* and the Nulapeiron sequence, *Paradox*, *Context* and *Resolution*. It tells the story of how the mind-devouring villain of Meaney's first novel becomes the assimilating hive mind adversary of the later sequence. It also adds depth and flavour to the milieu of his heroes, genetically engineered Pilots who are bred to navigate the fractal subspace that allows faster-than-light travel in this background.

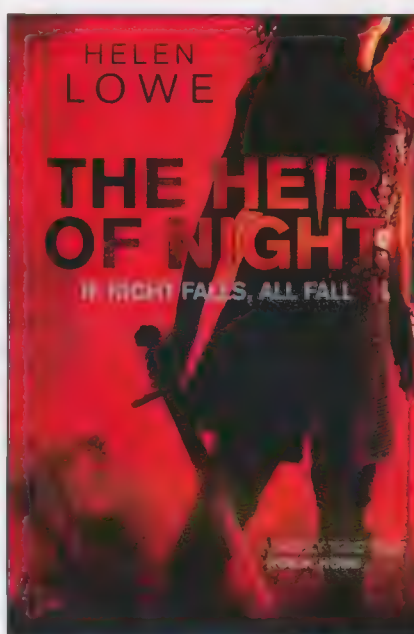
The trilogy is written in several strands separated by hundreds, thousands or up to a million years, as a council of war builds up a response to an enemy described as the Darkness, which appears to some of the characters as a literal cloud of darkness around its agents, or as a subliminal sequence of music when they come across its works.

The plot strands connect through a form of time travel in which characters can communicate intermittently, possessing one another to fight their way out of sticky situations and meeting half a million years in the future to form the Ragnarok council to fight the Darkness.

The agents of the Darkness are behind the development of the hive mind threat and other threats in the past, including Nazism; a plot strand of *Transmission* introduces the idea that the Darkness is a threat from outside the galaxy, which will require a massive build-up over a million years to counter. Hints are dropped through the first and second books that the struggle against the enemy is the basis, through the characters' memories of the future, of the Norse myths of the war of the gods. Some of the characters also have the ironic ambivalence of the Norse gods, and at least one point of view is of an agent of the Darkness.

As fitting a story with such a grand theme, Ragnarok is space opera with grand settings. The Pilots' city Labyrinth is a fractal universe in itself with infinitely long boulevards. In the first novel a high culture of people interlinked through cybernetics and mental upgrades dies when its smart-matter cities become aware and subsume them. In this novel smart-matter floating cities in a gas giant atmosphere coalesce into a gigantic civilisational snowball for a four-yearly festival. This of course does not end well.

Transmission is the second act of the Ragnarok story. It fills in detail that makes sense of some parts of the first act, allows time for the plot to thicken, and moves the actors into place for the finale. Some plot strands are only there to set up incidents in the main sequence and at least one does not appear to have any relevance as yet. The book definitely does not stand alone, and while it has a pyrotechnic climax, in which the enemy's agents cause mayhem and escape to continue the threat into the third act, I was left with the same feeling as when Frodo and Sam are looking at the walls of Mordor or when the Rebels are leaving to search for Han Solo.



THE HEIR OF NIGHT

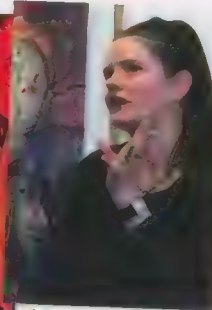
Helen Lowe

Orbit, 464pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

One of my favourite books is Peter Straub's novel *Ghost Story*, not only because the first word of the book is "because", but also because it starts brilliantly with a tense, intriguing prologue where a man has snatched a young girl, is on the run with her and wants to kill her, but is also clearly terrified of her. The prologue is really the second-last chapter of the book. An often-used device by authors, methinks. Robert McCammon employed a similar trick in his novel *Stinger*, albeit with a change of viewpoint. Helen Lowe doesn't do anything so familiar; in fact, she employs a device, or literary (or maybe that should be typesetting) trick, that made me go, "Eh?" I almost contacted the editor to ask, "You know this Helen Lowe you sent me? It isn't a proof copy with...?" Ah, no spoilers here. You will definitely know what I mean when you read the opening few chapters.

The Heir of Night of the title is Malian, the only daughter of the Earl of Night, ruler of the House of Night, one of the nine houses that make up the Derai, and possibly the most important House given that they guard the Wall of Night, which is the only thing holding back the Darkswarm who would engulf the world of Haarth where the novel is set. Given that her mother is dead, and her father is rather dour-faced and consumed by duty

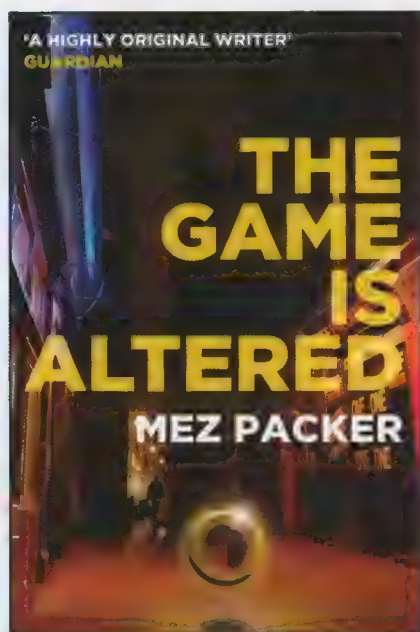


and doing the right thing by the rules of the Derai, Malian is a rebellious free spirit who likes to slip away to explore the maze-like and dangerous Old Keep at every opportunity, despite the consternation of her guardians who

constantly remind her of her importance in the grand scheme of things. "If Night falls, all fall," as the saying goes.

No sooner has her father returned after a long absence (with his mysterious lover from the Winter People as part of his entourage) than two heralds turn up bearing news that only the Earl can hear and, as Malian slips away from all this boring courtly "stuff", the Darkswarm strike with a soul-sucking Raptor of Darkness. Help comes in the shape of Kalan, a young man from the House of Blood who has demonstrated his ability to tap into the "old powers" which means that he is sent to join the priests, but he too, is a rebellious teenager, taken to wandering parts of the castle and keeping his eyes and ears open, particularly remembering the old stories which have almost been lost. In fact, he might know more about the ways of the Derai than anyone else. He also has a handy little old power in his repertoire if you are being hunted down by the Darkswarm. Together, they end up deep in the Old Keep where there are other older powers waiting to be re-ignited, and prophecies to be fulfilled.

It would be a shame to consider this inferior fare to the likes of George R.R. Martin given the cast of characters and the level of intrigue going on here, not to mention some excellent world-building, particularly the division of the warriors from the priests and why that happened. Lowe is also particularly good at coming up with great names for her characters and knocking down some gender stereotypes, although even an old geezer like me didn't see the need for a glossary, but – hey – nice map. This is superior fantasy with a smattering of science fiction as we learn that the Derai and the Darkswarm have been waging their war on other planets and are not indigenous to Haarth at all, and some of the locals would prefer that their planet does not go the way of previous battlegrounds. Expect more secrets and revelations in book two, *The Gathering of the Lost*. Recommended.



THE GAME IS ALTERED

Mez Packer

Tindal Street Press, 348pp, £12.99 pb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

Lionel Byrd's mother died three days after his birth. He was adopted by her best friend, Judy, and brought back to Britain from Kenya. However he is mixed race and his adoptive family are all white. Only his father, David, and sister, Lilith, regard him with any affection while his mother and her two sons treat him coldly. In childhood the two boys subjected him to "games" in which he was the butt of their cruelty, describing him (apparently after *Blade Runner*) as a replicant and, at one point, nearly hanging him. His recall of these events is hazy as an accident when he was ten has deprived him of many of his childhood memories.

As an adult he is estranged from his adoptive family, apart from his sister, and lives a lonely existence in a grotty flat in a rundown district near a "Health Centre" which is a cover for people-trafficking and prostitution. He is aloof at work despite attempts to befriend him, his closest companion is his cat Buddha, and he fantasises about a girl he has seen in the street with whom he is convinced he has made a connection. While friendly with his barber, a West Indian whose speech is rendered demotically and who doesn't like Lionel's taking up of dreadlocks, he has a close relationship only with Lilith and escapes from mundane reality into an immersive computer game called

CoreQuest where his avatar is Ludi, a much more active persona. His father's final illness leads to Lionel's re-entanglement with his adoptive family and revelations about the circumstances of his adoption.

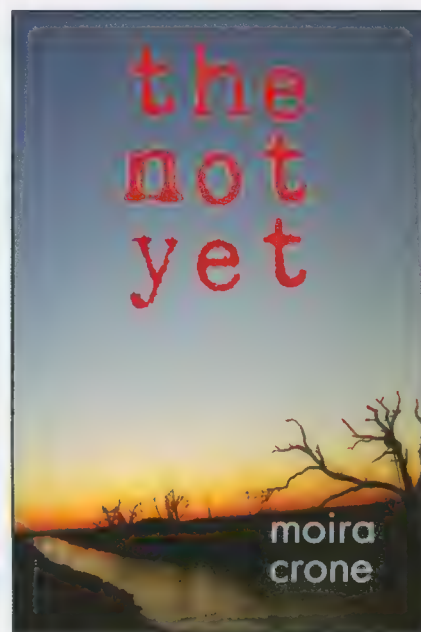
The novel is on the whole well written but its structure is problematic. It is divided into chapters dealing with Lionel's life, each usually followed by an epigraph relating to gaming, then a segment from the game. These latter – escalating through the game's levels – are related from Ludi's viewpoint in a partly debased form of English. Irritatingly, Packer does not always sustain this street language throughout the game segments' lengths.

We are intended to draw parallels between the characters in Lionel's world and avatars in the game but these sections do not add to the story. References to the possibly elusive nature of reality – the phrase "It's only a game" appears in Lionel's narrative several times; a character says, "People are so programmed" – are not enough to justify the conceit embodied within them nor the presence of the gaming chapters. There is also the problem that in games there is no jeopardy. Why should the reader care about the characters within them when they are not real?

As a result the novel as presented is unsatisfying, particularly to readers of speculative fiction, who are used to the mixing of the real with the fantastic – or paranoia – and even the melding of reality with games. Packer seems either to be unaware of or unconcerned with the literary antecedents.

This is a pity as the main narrative is well handled and, until it begins to unravel somewhat in the latter stages, convincing. It could stand alone, without the game aspect, and be entirely coherent – though of course not SF. The attempts to suggest a degree of futurity, such as the coinage "Google device" for a handheld computer-like phone, are ill thought through (even when shortened to "Google") and there is insufficient foreshadowing of Lionel's ultimately shaky grasp on the real world.

The website of the book's publisher states it does not consider submissions, among other genres, of Ssci-fi (sic) nor fantasy. In those circumstances it does seem strange to be reviewing one of their books for *Interzone*. Yet its back cover blurb says "for readers of [...] Cory Doctorow, China Miéville and Neal Stephenson." Very odd. But then again despite its trappings *The Game is Altered* overall does not read as SF, nor fantasy.



THE NOT YET

Moira Crone

University of New Orleans Press, 272pp, \$15.95 pb

Reviewed by Stephen Theaker

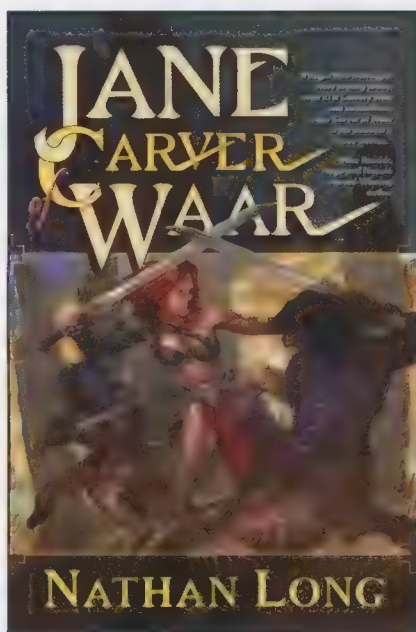
Malcolm de Lazarus is the Not Yet of this book's title, an orphan who spent his childhood performing in gruelling Sims to entertain the Heirs, a transhuman ruling class with fading memories of what it was like to really live. His earnings went into his Trust, and when he reaches the Boundarytime those savings should pay for his own longevity treatments. He'll become one of them, shrunk and shrivelled within a spectacular skin-suit and headpiece – and he can't wait. In 2121 we see him struggle to discover why his Trust is in escrow; whether a beloved mentor has betrayed him. Chapters from 2117 and subsequent years see the Sims business in ruins and the orphans in search of alternative work, bringing Malcolm into contact with Dr Susan Greenmore and her efforts to understand the chronic foginess that afflicts the oldest of the Heirs. From earlier than that we see episodes from his childhood in the orphanage, where the children are taught to endure and shrug off the worst that can happen: it's all Prologue.

This is, I think, Moira Crone's first science fiction – previous literary fiction such as *What Gets Into Us* having examined the history of the South since the 1950s – but there's no sense of dabbling; rather, of a writer who has identified science fiction as an effective method

of addressing her concerns. Published by the University of New Orleans Press, it imagines a time when that region is mostly beneath the waves, and though some sections saw publication long before Hurricane Katrina, it feels like a reflection upon that disaster, imagining an America where the poor must paddle not just for a week or two, but for the rest of their lives. Its cover, at first glance an underwhelming photograph of a river and trees, gains resonance as the book proceeds, a reminder that this is not one of Vance's far-off, extravagant worlds: it's ours with a few nudges in the wrong direction.

Reflecting contemporary concerns about healthcare provision in the United States, the lives of those ordinary humans (Nats) will be short. All research into the diseases that affect them has been abandoned, partly to encourage them to save up and join the Heirs, but also because there's no profit in it since the economy collapsed. In Malcolm's fascination with the Heirs, and disgust at such ordinary human processes as eating solid food, we see the way we idolise the ersatz, photoshopped faces on magazine covers and movie posters: he hates himself for his fascination with fleshy, human, real Tamara. It's a novel that shows, in its ultimate underground anti-Sim, the Verite, where nothing is simulated at all, the degradation that ordinary men and women will endure to survive, to provide for their children – in this case, to fund an enclave's transfer to new land – and while grieving for that degradation celebrates the pride of those who do not give up.

Although *The Not Yet* delivers a stern warning about the present, and though it is published by a university press and written by a professor, it is by no means academic, dry or lecturing. From the first we share Malcolm's febrile desperation to get his money back, even if we hope he won't use it to turn himself into a monster. Like Taylor among the apes, he has a series of exciting adventures and uncovers the great secret of his world – the circumstances and consequences of the Reveal, when the Heirs made themselves public – much of which sounds horribly plausible; in many ways the novel resembles a story of alien occupation, the aliens our self-proclaimed heirs. *The Not Yet* should appeal to any reader with an appreciation for the kind of novels Silverberg wrote in the late sixties and early seventies: short, tense, discomfiting and serious-minded. An intelligent and thought-provoking piece of work.



JANE CARVER OF WAAR

Nathan Long

Night Shade Books, 312pp, \$14.99 pb

Reviewed by Stephen Theaker

The heroine of *Jane Carver of Waar* begins her story not on the far-off Barsoomian world of the title, but here on earth, getting groped by an asshole in a Californian car park. She's a tall, strong biker chick who trained in the Airborne Rangers, and so he's soon dead, she's soon on the run, and like John Carter before her she ends up in a cave whose contents transport her to another world. She was "just too fucking big for this world", and that goes double on Waar, where she stands out like the redhead burning in the sun that she is. Despite the friends she wins with her bravery, kindness and sensitive bedroom advice, her loneliness drives her desire to get home. To do that she'll have to help gorgeous, delicate Sai-Far, son of Shen-Far, Dhanan of Sensa.

His proud betrothed, the Aldhanshai Wen-Jhai, has been spirited away by Kedac-Zir, Kir-Dhanan of all Ora. Getting her back is not merely a matter of alerting the authorities, or even snatching her in secret: Sai-Far is honour-bound to challenge her abductor to a duel, and Wen-Jhai will be the first to despise him should he fail to do so. An early encounter with the Kir-Dhanan leaves Jane Carver with her own reasons to see him dead. That leaves one question to pursue Jane and Sai-Far through all their subsequent

adventures, through airborne pirates, southern slavery and rooftop escapes: will she let Sai-Far have his shot at Kedac-Zir, and thus at honour and happiness, or will she kill the Kir-Dhanan herself for what he did to her? It's all complicated by the fact that fighting Kedac-Zir will almost certainly mean the death – even if it's an honourable death – of Sai-Far, and she's becoming really fond of him, even if he isn't her usual type.

Jane Carver is an interesting heroine, but readers who don't find her appealing might not get far with the book since it's all in the first person, supposedly transcribed – fruity language and all – by Nathan Long from fifteen tapes she recorded upon her return to our planet. As the book went on, I grew to like her very much. Her sense of honour, as revealed through her actions; her sensitivity to knowing she's not on the romantic horizon of the man she's protecting; her anger at the unfair social conditions on Waar; and her willingness to challenge the ideas of her friends: all round out the stereotypical biker we think we meet in the early pages. She's not the only vivid character in the book. I became as fond as Jane was of pathetic Sai-Far, and even more so of his best friend and fellow princeling Lhan, whose shift from despondency to enthusiasm upon Sai-Far's resolution to throw away his life was a highlight of the novel, as well as the perfect encapsulation of the alien society in which Jane has found herself.

At a glance this novel looks very much like a straightforward blend of *Red Sonja* and *A Princess of Mars*, and it would be daft to argue against that impression. From the title and the framing device onward this is a full-blooded homage to Edgar Rice Burroughs. But that's not all there is to it, and readers will I think be surprised by the depth of characterisation, the interplay of societal mores, and how much you hope to hear Jane's voice again once the novel is over. Plenty of scope for further adventures remains, and so one does hope that she found her way back to Waar, and that another box of tapes will find their way to Nathan Long. It would certainly be nice to



read a novel where this big, strong, admirable woman didn't get groped quite so much.

Night Shade Books will be releasing a second Jane Carver novel, *Swords of Waar*, soon.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

RESISTANCE

THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN

THE FUTURE

SPACE: ABOVE AND BEYOND

DARK SHADOWS

CLONE

DEADBALL

YAKUZA WEAPON

HAYWIRE

UNDERWORLD AWAKENING



Amit Gupta's **RESISTANCE** (BD/DVD, 19 March) is an alternative history set on the Welsh border during WW2. After D-Day fails, Germans invade the Olchon Valley. Local wife Sarah (Andrea Riseborough) is probably a widow but does not know it yet. She becomes involved with a German officer of the variably sympathetic invaders, so a romantic drama actually does very little with the potential for conflicts in its genre scenario except for building up a sensitive psychological tragedy about betrayals and collaboration, initially centred upon a Nazi treasure quest for the Mappa Mundi relic which Germans find hidden in a cave. Amidst simmering tensions of the occupation, with Germans out of uniform (trying not to intimidate the small community, ha-ha!), there's time for a county show and a lot of other farming district stuff that amounts to probably too many rugged but untroubled landscape views for a war movie. The budget is obviously too low for creating any spectacular wartime battles but, in flashbacks, which seemingly haunt the Germans' leader, there are a few complementary action sequences. It's all charmingly old-fashioned but a bit of a trifle really.



THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN – THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

(DVD, 16 April) delivers a television phenomenon based on Martin Caidin's novel *Cyborg* (1972). It starts with a trio of TV movies about a plainclothes superhero, made out of 'scrap' after astronaut Colonel Steve Austin barely survives crashing his test flight of an experimental plane. With bionics, Steve becomes a nuclear-powered living weapon with obligations to his creators. The pilot movies of 1973 shifted genre emphasis from solid SF drama to spy adventures. At first, there is speeded up footage, but no sound effects for the bionics. The original movie features Martin Balsam as Dr Rudy Wells, and brilliant character-actor Darren McGavin as cyborg-project boss Oliver Spencer (a role soon revised into the more sympathetic Oscar Goldman).

Scripted by Glen Larson, *Wine, Women and War* adopts a slicker yet more frivolous approach with Steve now a playboy astronaut turned bionic agent as mouthpiece for corny quips. Re-cast supporting characters for a mainstream/prime time appeal are accompanied by a campy theme song ("He's the man...") performed by Dusty Springfield, along with a focus on American fashions. It benefits from initial lack of trust between Office of Scientific Investigation (OSI) chief Oscar (Richard Anderson) and Steve (Lee Majors), while Rudy (Alan Oppenheimer, voice of *Mighty Mouse*) struggles to mediate, but this developing series explores the unlikely but great friendship between administrator Oscar and space cowboy/cyborg action hero Steve. WWAW guest stars Britt Ekland, a typecast David McCallum, Eric Braeden (*Forbin Project*), and Earl Holliman, all of whom act perennially wooden or plastic Majors off the screen with ease. Majors simply cannot act, but he can pretend well enough. He has the stuff for TV but lacks the *right stuff*.

A third TV movie, *Solid Gold Kidnapping*, partners Steve with brain



scientist Erica (Elizabeth Ashley, *Coma*). John Vernon is good value as the boss of a criminal organisation.

The first story of a five-year run of 100 episodes, *Population: Zero*, is directed by Jeannot Szwarc. It starts with the now iconic title sequence (created by Jack Cole), one of the most accomplished and memorable sci-fi TV info-dumps, with its "we have the technology" narration. Certainly an improvement over that embarrassingly cheesy theme song. Terrorists use a sonic weapon to extort ransom from the US government, but we guess Uncle Sam won't pay. In his own 'custom' Moon-walker spacesuit, Steve goes into a 'dead' town, and early scenes copycat *Andromeda Strain* eeriness. Several episodes have routine action/espionage, with planes crashed or flights missing/lost, rescue missions, piracy, unsolvable crimes, the hero's amnesia/framed for murder or spying, etc, alongside nominal sci-fi of nuclear terrorism, parapsychology mysteries, doppelgängers and imposters, a ghost, sentient computers, plus much young actress eye-candy traipsing around like tradeshow sales-booth babes.

Operation Firefly is about a scientist's daughter (Pamela Franklin, *Legend of Hell House*) with ESP, and has the instantly memorable sound effects soon to be used on a regular basis for bionics in slow-motion stunts (initiates may wonder why Steve's super eyesight has its own audible signature!). *Day of the Robot* concerns a powerful android (John Saxon!) that could replace heroic Steve. With support from NASA, this TV show displays plenty of space hardware as background props or location furniture and, in the era of USA and USSR cooperation, with a much publicised Apollo-Soyuz link-up mid-1975, the programme reflects this political détente in supposedly friendly high-frontier team-ups.

Rescue of Athena One features Majors' second wife Farah Fawcett (later a star of *Charlie's Angels* and *Saturn 3*) playing the



first American woman in space nearly a decade before the real world's historic flight by Sally Ride. There's an *Apollo 13*-style accident, prompting a Skylab layover, and Steve leads a rescue mission to Earth orbit for an unsubtle variation of John Sturges' movie *Marooned* (1969), which was based upon Caidin's 1964 novel. Using further NASA footage, *Burning Bright* sees William Shatner playing an astronaut ("All my life, I dreamed about going up in space") who develops worrying mental powers after a spacewalk. However, his brain-boost (pace *Charly*, *The Power*, both 1968) eventually turns him doolally. Can even a bionic man cope with the Shat's usual screen persona?

The Pioneers has astronaut David (Mike Farrell, *MASH*) testing a regeneration formula for suspended animation in orbit, but re-entry crash twists him into a super-strong maniac in a tale predating British SF-horror serial *The Nightmare Man* (1981).

A foreign prime minister gets the first bionic heart in low-key *The Pal-Mir Escort*, but *The Seven Million Dollar Man* features an ex-racing driver Barney (Monte Markham) as the second bionic OSI agent. He does not adjust well after a near fatal crash, and psych problems make him crazily unstable: "It's wild, Steve!" A cyborg team-up turns into a duel of self-image values and survival ethics, when the prosthetics deeply affect personality, inflicting lunatic behaviour for the genre TV punch-up of the year, if not the decade.

Meg Foster (*They Live*, *Emerald Forest*) plays telepath Minonee from a family of alien visitors, unfairly hunted as toxic psychics, in a UFO encounter written by D.C. Fontana. Nice guy Steve wangles her a free ticket home in a NASA rocket. Perhaps the producers had never heard of *The Cold Equations*. Anyway, *Deadly Replay* gives bold Steve a second chance to fly the HL-10, a rebuild of the plane which nearly killed him. Titles like *E.S.P. Spy* inevitably give the game away about psychic girl/counter-agent Audrey, who reappeared later in the series. There are many such



weak stories, easily dismissed as cross-genre nonsense.

Lindsay Wagner's debut episode, as Steve's former girlfriend Jaime Sommers, in *The Bionic Woman*, is a two-parter by Kenneth Johnson. A tennis champ, Jaime is crippled by a sky-dive, and Steve persuades Oscar to fix her limbs and give her a new ear. The dynamic duo plan to marry soon but, during their first mission together, she insists on her independence to meet vaguely feminist commitments. And yet, "We're gonna live happily ever after, aren't we?" she asks. Steve mugs: "You bet." A blood clot settles matters as her body rejects the implants...

Season three sags horribly midway, with several middling to poor storylines, from tracking down *Wolf Boy* (heralding TV series *Lucan*?) in Japan, to Steve going undercover as a lumberjack, or stage magician, or a bodyguard. However, this series' try-anything-once mixed bag of such plots is almost endearing now. Martin E. Brooks replaces Oppenheimer as Rudy and so the scientist becomes a more rounded character. For two-parter *Return of The Bionic Woman*, Steve discovers that Jaime is not dead. She's been revived from cryogenic storage, but brain damage has wiped her memory. She begins remembering her past with Steve while staying at his ranch and this episode proves content with the melodrama of lost love instead of exploring genre possibilities of an identity crisis. A brief kiss goodbye and off she goes, for now.

Bionic Criminal sees the return of Barney (now Hiller not Miller), powered up and supercharged again for controlled tests foreshadowing *Universal Soldier* (1992). It's like the maniac who's been released again, with a mecha tune-up from normality, and Barney becomes a gang's lynxpin in a bank robbery, although a blackmail scam against him is partly responsible for his reckless behaviour. *The Secret of Bigfoot* is a two-parter about legendary Sasquatch (ex-wrestler Andre the Giant), all the rage in

the 1970s, and notable for also being added to mythology of *The Incredible Hulk* TV show. Here, Stefanie Powers plays kitschy alien Shalon who lives in California (but of course!), hidden inside a mountain. The big hairy beast is actually a robot henchman, eager to wrestle with Steve in the woods. Escaping from the time-shifting aliens' little colony, Steve ensures that fresh tremors don't harm any humans and, with help from Bigfoot, saves most of the ETs too.

Season four starts with *The Return of Bigfoot*, and sees Steve sporting a pencil moustache. His memory of Shalon's colony is unlocked by another ET girl, who warns that some aliens (led by John Saxon) go bad and want only to conquer not explore the cosmos. Another tussle with Sasquatch tests our cyborg heroes again. Steve is 'fatally' damaged (I blame that moustache!), so Jaime has to complete his mission, and locate Shalon whose super-tech/wonder drug could fix Steve. Can even our bionic duo stop a volcanic eruption? *Kill Oscar - Part Two* is bracketed by the crossover episodes from spin-off series *The Bionic Woman* (1976-8), in a typical comicbook styled ruse to win over viewers to both programmes. Here, the baddie (John Houseman) is purveyor of 'fembot' secretaries like Stepford wives gone psycho, ready for assassination jobs. *The Bionic Boy* is about a new cyborg,

young Andy (Vincent Van Patten, *Hell Night*), and it's a feature-length episode that does exactly what it says on the tin – although scenes of sports training and summer dance are corny time-filler.

With Steve absent, *The Ultimate Impostor* focuses winningly on OSI agent Joe (Stephen Macht, *Monster Squad*) in Rudy's latest experiment for data transfer/brain programming as learning tool. Reluctant spy Jenny (Pamela Hensley, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*) needs rescuing, and Joe's impersonation ability makes the mission possible. The crook's daughter Lorraine was an early TV role for Kim Basinger, before she starred in cop show *Dog and Cat* (1977). Clearly inspired by *Joe 90*, this episode was, reportedly, the pilot for another non-bionic but cyber-hero related spin-off show that was not produced, but it served as the prototype for TV comedy *Chuck* (2007-?).

In the wake of UFO sightings, the autonomous space machine, in *Death Probe*, ploughs through a farmyard in Wyoming (a year before Devil's Tower in *CE3K*), but it is not otherworldly, it's a rogue Russian robotic lander, built to explore Venus, and so "nothing on Earth can stop it". While it zigzags across country in a comedy of errors, the probe becomes an amusingly belligerent character in its own right, as every clever attempt to stop it fails. By now, bionic sound effects have

become happily parodic and every object thrown in slow-mo whistles as it flies through the air.

Steve's moustache is gone for the final year, and it's apparent how much mettle fatigue has set in, although two-partner *Deadly Countdown* has the extra interest of Jenny Agutter playing a computer engineer, in training for the orbital mission with Steve, to fix a faulty DoD satellite. As usual, the TV series celebrates modern tech with its stock footage of a NASA launch. *Bigfoot V* finds Sasquatch (now played by Ted Cassidy, the voice of television's Hulk), left behind by the aliens, and rudely awakened to rampage across the countryside like an angry bear. *Dark Side of the Moon* puts Steve in space with scientist Dr Leith (hammy Jack Colvin), looking for a new energy source. This is speculative about mining asteroids but the rather silly mix-up of its imagery is clearly Mars (perhaps recycling sets from *Capricorn One?*), and one Apollo module is shown to have roomy interiors. Steve returns to the Moon – on a solo flight – to investigate a mysterious orbital shift (cribbed from *Space 1999?*), causing weather havoc on Earth. Steve is captured by madly obsessed Leith ("I can deal with anything but a moralising dreamer"), whose unauthorised expedition crew have already built their pressurised mineshaft on the dark side. Where are the *Star Cops* when they're needed?



Cat lovers rejoice, **THE FUTURE** (DVD, 23 April) isn't bright, but it is furry – according to Miranda July, director and star of this indie oddity, anyway. Sophie and Jason live in L.A. with laptops and lifeless jobs, both entertaining a frivolous

existence together before, instead of seriously considering having a child, they adopt stray mouser Paw-Paw (an incurably twee voice by July), with one month to wait until they can collect it from the vet's. Striving to find any meaning beyond online

ennui – is there life without Internet? – *The Future* is a mildly, not wildly, eccentric ice-cream cool batch of sweetly witless vignettes. Sometimes it's vague docusoap, as when Jason tries doorstep sales. Occasionally, it's surrealist nonsense, as when Jason somehow manages to stop time, and talks to the Moon. It's not really worthwhile viewing though (Sophie's attempts at dancing for webcam videos are particularly farcical), it's only a bundle of unappealing quirks and some flimsy introspection masquerading as hipster whimsy with suburban magic realism sprinkled on top of another typically talky Sundance-bait project. This is certainly not boring or awful, but it's not a good movie either. Most of all, it's just a little bemusing. Auteur wannabe July (*Me and You and Everyone We Know*, 2005) is hardly ever pretentious, she only seems happy to mistake her competent meekness for artistic courage. David Lynch does this sort of thing so much better. Leave it to the professionals please.

Just a Matter of Time sees an experimental spacecraft timewarp our Steve six years into future, where he's charged with treason for defecting to the USSR. John de Lancie (Q on *Star Trek* spin-offs) plays an airbase sergeant in this big-time con game.

In two-parter *Return of Deathprobe*, a new alloy leads Steve and Oscar to encounter another Russian robot, and this one is fully weaponised like some battle-ready Dalek, an unstoppable destroyer without the weaknesses of that previous mecha-monster. It is a really good, funny episode, as our heroes are outwitted by the machine character. *The Lost Island* has radiation leaking from a satellite, which crashed on an 'invisible' island near Hawaii, causing atavistic mutations in yet another highly secretive colony of aliens. They're everywhere! Steve retrieves that space hardware, befriends the half-human girl, reverses the devolution effects, and saves the colony. Job done!

As in many old TV shows, a big part of the appeal for watching some episodes is the welcome appearance of guest stars with or without genre cred, although some are blatantly typecast: Gary Lockwood (hitman, traitor); Farah Fawcett (TV reporter, catching Steve's bionic stunts on video); Martine Beswick (Irish kidnapper); Chuck Connors (ex-convict defuses bomb); Sonny Bono (crooked entertainer);

Erik Estrada (Chinese prince); Henry Darrow (shady arms dealer); Robert Loggia (foreign despot); Jane Merrow (Russian scientist); William Sylvester (USN admiral); Suzanne Somers (test pilot of stealth plane); Bibi Besch (a countess in trouble); John Colicos (Russian general); Anne Lockhart (ambassador's wife).

Discs packed with extras include three reunion movies. *The Return of The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* (1987) is a ten-years-later affair, as Steve comes out of retirement to help Oscar defend America against right wing mercenaries led by escaped convict Stenning (Martin Landau). Steve's estranged son (Tom Schanley) is also a pilot, and has an accident, repairable only by upgraded bionics. Some better stunts (this appeared soon after Major's TV series *The Fall Guy*, 1981-6) and special effects are ably directed by Ray Austin. Steve contacts Jaime again, obviously, to find that her memories have returned, but this adds more problems to the scenario than it solves. Rescues, explosions, shoot-outs, and a father-and-son reconciliation, of course, but the awful 1980s' pop/rock score dates this badly.

Bionic Showdown (1989) offers a more sophisticated illustration of bionics than seen previously, with tech stitched into veins and fixed to alloy bones. Sandra Bullock co-stars as the new OSI cyborg

product, Kate. Wagner is looking more matronly than mighty maiden, and a heavyset Majors lacks star quality at fifty, but old pro Anderson has fine-tuned his exemplary TV-style acting chops to carry the drama through super-spy antics and kidnapping plots, centred on political machinations for a World Unity Games (a thinly disguised Olympics) in Toronto.

Blurry images for superheroic action presage *Smallville*, in *Bionic Ever After?* (aka: *Bionic Breakdown*, 1994). Having proposed at the end of *Showdown*, Steve and Jaime's wedding plans are interrupted by terrorists in the Bahamas. Jaime's bionics malfunction and Rudy is baffled. Steve quits his bedside vigil for an overseas mission. There's a blast from the past and a traitor among OSI agents. The dream team-up are back in action with upgrades but they are "definitely getting too old for this". And are looking more dated than ever in our techno/gadget-obsessed present, where smartphones are the new chocolate.

Re-edited syndicated versions of the movies (the first pilot becomes a two-parter, *The Moon and the Desert*), plus more than your money's worth in various laudatory retrospective featurettes, make this 40-disc boxset a likely winner as a collector's item. There's excellent re-mastering for digital transfers, in aspect ratio of 1.33:1, so expect a pillar-box format with crisp monaural sound.

Although it predates Paul Verhoeven's phenomenal *Starship Troopers* by a couple of years, **SPACE: ABOVE AND BEYOND** (1995-6) is merely run-of-the-mill as militaristic sci-fi, created by Glen Morgan and James Wong. As ever, with many such US derived war stories, it contemplates the failures of Vietnam - found in not understanding the enemy. Here, the enemy's a race of mysterious aliens, dubbed 'chigs', unseen invaders of human colony worlds, sparking a vast interstellar conflict.

With a scenario of newly recruited space marines and pilots learning how to defend humanity, it cruises along in the long wake of Glen Larson's *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-80), while a hyper-drive ambition is evident in the ways it purposefully sharpens up tactical prowess without a reliance on *Star Wars*' fairytale destiny of young Luke Skywalker's fabled strike to the Death Star's imperial hordes. It does not attempt to follow the spirit of the Enola Gay pilot's biopic *Above and Beyond* (1952)

because, generally, it's all about the success of teamwork, not individuals.

Centred on building a small but elite fighting unit, the narrative forms around nominal hero Morgan Weissner as Lieutenant Nathan West, with digressions in favour of Rodney Rowland as tank-born clone Cooper Hawkes - initially the target for 'racist' attitudes - but it's gorgeous Kristen Cloke (also great in *Millennium*) as Captain Shane Vansen who becomes the star, steals the show, and she married Glen Morgan in 1998.

Space aviators of the 58th squadron are called Wildcards and the single-season arc of twenty-four episodes sees them developing from gauche cadets into battle-hardened veterans. The team's commanding officer is Colonel McQueen (James Morrison, 'Buchanan' in 24), who plays it gruff 'n' tuff with rookies, but maintains both moderate compassion and a social conscience throughout various ordeals and tragedies.

Usually contrasting or conflicting the

mothership/space-carrier USS *Saratoga* crew's personal stuff with their professional duties (a typical mix of tedium and terror), episodic storylines here are often interesting yet rarely fascinating. Intrigues about the generic alien Chigs are based, partly, on their AI collaborators, the Silicates, whose history and motivation is clouded by rumoured political conspiracies and technocratic power-plays.

Although this is not particularly adventurous in terms of modern space opera tropes or hard SF literature, the series is a welcome re-release in a collector's edition (DVD, 23 April) with a brand new 45-minute retro documentary featurette about the making of the show.

In sci-fi TV's recycling of war themes, *Space: Above and Beyond* was followed by Chris Roberts' decidedly average TV serial *Wing Commander* (1999), and its genre impact - if not its importance to a chronology of sci-fi media in the last twenty years - was eventually eclipsed by the overblown *BSG* remake.



"Get out of this house, right now!"

Created by Dan Curtis, ABC's cult TV series **DARK SHADOWS** (DVD, 30 April) had over 1,200 episodes, aired from 1966–71. This DVD boxset is quite selective and benefits from publicity for Tim Burton's big screen remake. Following a helpful introduction (made in 1989) for the uninitiated, it starts with episode #210, first shown in 1967. This ignores the programme's first year which was basically just a soap opera, surprisingly without any overt genre content. Shot in faded b&w on video it's a chatty and actorly serial with gothic atmosphere and campy melodramatic twists routinely emphasised

by Robert Cobert's memorable score.

Orphaned Victoria (Alexandra Isles) takes a new job in the spooky Collinwood mansion of Collinsport, Maine, where matriarchal Elizabeth (Joan Bennett) lives with assorted relatives, friends, and strangers. An ancestor, buried along with some jewels in the family crypt, seems ripe for grave-robbler Loomis (John Karlen, later suffering further troubles with similar menaces in *Daughters of Darkness*), who disappears for a couple of days, eventually returning from that cemetery escapade looking sickly and haunted, and seemingly doomed to Renfield-like obedience. He started at the bottom and worked his way down. A doctor's house-call reports this as a case of anaemia but: "There is one thing that puzzles me." Only one?

Cursed vampire Barnabas Collins (the late Jonathan Frid, of *Devil's Daughter*, Oliver Stone's *Seizure*) is resurrected, off-screen, and prefers to spend his days in the family's rundown residence, once it's made habitable again. Most supernatural events and happenings (cattle drained of blood by expert means, etc) occur off-screen, partly because this was a daytime show, but a glacial narrative is largely due to its extremely limited budget (spilling coffee

and breaking the cup seems to use the money allocated for an episode's stunts). Local wharf theme pub Blue Whale is a frequent meeting spot for a medley of campy suspicions, foggy mysteries, timeless secrets open to blackmail, and (by today's much quicker pace for TV dramas) a torpidly slow build up of merely wheedling suspense with a dated quality that is unfortunate – but only to be expected in this supernatural terror scenario, which is perfectly safe for maiden aunts and your prudish granny. Well, "I knew about the locked room, but I was always told not to ask questions about it."

The third disc contains only some extras, so there are no colour episodes. After the TV series came director Curtis' spin-off movie versions *House of Dark Shadows* (1970) and *Night of the Dark Shadows* (1971). Obviously, the subgenre roots of that far superior TV chiller *Salem's Lot* can be found in this series. *Dark Shadows* enjoyed a 1991 prime time revival by NBC with a cast including Ben Cross, Joanna Going, Jean Simmons, Roy Thinnes, Barbara Steele, and Lysette Anthony. Reportedly, there was a 2005 pilot movie from WB network, but that remains unreleased.



Benedek Fliegauf's sci-fi romance *Womb* is re-titled **CLONE** for DVD/BD release (7 May). It stars the unusual pairing of Eva Green with Matt Smith. Produced before *Perfect Sense* (*Black Static* #27), *Clone* has Green trying, yet failing again, to raise the bar for acting in somewhat arty genre movies. This indie flick is a twisted romance, as nine and ten-year-

old friends Rebecca and Tommy are reunited in adulthood. When Thomas (Smith) is accidentally killed (off-screen drama), tragically obsessed Rebecca (Green) gets official permission from his grieving parents to impregnate herself with their son's DNA. Time flies through new Tommy's infancy/puberty, and motherhood turns into incest. Social issues

of single-parenting are sidestepped, while Hungarian director Fliegauf concentrates instead on this scenario's North Sea coastline scenery and Green's face, both attempting to convey some vastly complex emotional states.

When Tom grows up (played by charmingly inept Smith), the already troubled relationship develops apace with increasingly fraught psychological complications of morality when Tom learns of his repeat/'second childhood'. Green was great in 007 reboot *Casino Royale*, and *Golden Compass*, stunning in her debut for Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, and brought life to school drama *Cracks*, and genre mystery *Franklyn* (*Interzone* #223), but as Morgan Le Fay even she could not save TV series *Camelot*. She's quite brilliant as a technical actress with impressive range but sometimes Green tries much too hard for expressive depths when a more restrained approach would be quite appropriate. We will see how Green handles comedy in Tim Burton's big-screen remake of *Dark Shadows*. Meanwhile, a British Blu-ray and/or DVD release of Jean-Paul Salomé's *Adventures of Arsene Lupin* (2004), which features Green, seems long overdue.



DEADBALL (DVD, 7 May) is a Japanese comedy-horror about 'juvie league' baseball in a detention centre run by a Nazi bitch. Antihero inmate Jubei throws a fast-ball from hell, like the devil's own meteorite strike. It is eastern-western fu mixed together with farcical Tromatised grotesquery. While lethal-sports movies are typically fantasy metaphors of gladiatorial arenas, this is more like a Grand Guignol circus. With cheap CGI for hosepipe



nosebleeds, it's absurdly cartoonish and often silly but harmless fun as a sports-in-prison movie. Think of Robert Aldrich's *Mean Machine* (1974) infused with the manic *Evil Dead* mentality. Delinquent boys play against terrible sisterhood of the all-girls team, in the headline match of Pterodactyl Hall versus St Black Dahlia High School. The anarchic mayhem of a slapstick gore-fest follows. If you liked *Story of Ricky* (aka: *Lik Wong*, 1991), this

should appeal to your sense of humour too.

Deadball's director Yûdai Yamaguchi (genre previous: *Meatball Machine*) also co-directed **YAKUZA WEAPON** (BD/DVD, 7 May) with star/actor Tak Sakaguchi, maker of the erratic *Samurai Zombie* (*Black Static* #18). This is yet another bizarre comedy actioner, reportedly adapted from a manga and shot in less than a fortnight. Bulletproof 'Mad Dog' Shozo is a haphazard warrior. Grenades do not faze him, land mines only clean his shoes, but he has trouble with an Uzi-toting geisha/girlfriend. It is a rambling farce of slapstick punch-ups and CGI shoot-outs which form around the gangster chitchat about 'jingi' codes of honour and shouty dialogue concerning family responsibilities in matters of revenge. Shozo is nearly killed, but revived with cyborg attachments including a Gatling gun-arm. It's not so much a spoof of *RoboCop* as it is another splatterpunk variation of peculiarly Japanese gore-shock flicks like *Machine Girl* (*Black Static* #11). Shozo is so cartoonishly 'cool' that he pauses for a smoke right in the middle of a swordfight. The Kurawaki baddies' top assassin carries his armoury in the body of a naked girl. "No nuke scares a true yakuza!"



Steven Soderbergh's **HAYWIRE** (DVD/BD, 21 May) stars Texan action girl Gina Carano as vengeful ex-soldier Mallory Kane. That's all you need to know, really. This is not, strictly, a genre movie. It's about private security contractors getting involved with the US government and MI6, for surveillance and intelligence work in Barcelona and Dublin. Mallory is betrayed and has to kill a spy. After that, she's on the run from cops and killers. It's not genre like Joe Wright's *Hanna*, but it is a superb thriller, and Carano may be a 21st century Cynthia Rothrock.

What is obviously a genre actioner is **UNDERWORLD AWAKENING** (BD/DVD, 14 May) as directed by Måns Mårilind and Björn Stein, makers of *Storm* (*Interzone* #216), and *Shelter* (*Black Static*



#18). While previous *Underworld* movies were about vampires versus werewolves, this time it's a war against humanity as the world unites to destroy and/or contain the other species. Selene (Kate Beckinsale, *Vacancy*, *Whiteout*, and soon to be seen in her husband Len Wiseman's *Total Recall* remake) wakes up from twelve years of captivity in Antigen Labs' cryogenic storage. Considerately, the corporate scientists kept her skin-tight cat-suit, combat corset and biker boots all close to hand (presumably so our defrosted heroine does not have to escape into the night like Mathilda May's spacer did in *Lifeforce*).

Hybrid were-vamp Michael is gone ("My heart is not cold, it's broken"), but his teenage daughter Eve (pouty India Eisley) survives, and hardly needs protecting.

Selene is still very fond of twin full-auto Baretas as her signature guns. She struts, she bites to feed, and she kills without mercy. Detective Sebastian (Michael Ealy) is on the case. In the coven's hideaway, where Charles Dance plays the vampires' elder, Selene soon finds out that humans are coming, but the Lycans are already here, so it's time to lock 'n' load-up with silver bullets. Stephen Rea is top boffin Jacob, in ruthless pursuit of immunity to silver, and the weird science products include the Lycan 'hulk', which Selene has to fight. As expected, this is a high gloss combo of CGI and practical stunts, making the most of visual clarity for the superb HD transfer.

Ever since Sigourney Weaver established the new Hollywood agenda, every big name actress in showbiz today wants a genre action-movie franchise of her very own. The star looks great here and the *Underworld* saga always offers plenty of spectacular entertainment. However, no matter what Beckinsale does, Milla Jovovich simply does it better in the *Resident Evil* movies. *Underworld Awakening* ends with potential for a continuation of the story but, meanwhile, an *Underworld* 'quadrilogy' boxset is also available.

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE

•
THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

•
THE HUNGER GAMES

•
WRATH OF THE TITANS

•
MIRROR MIRROR

•
JOHN CARTER

•
BATTLESHIP

•
LOCKOUT



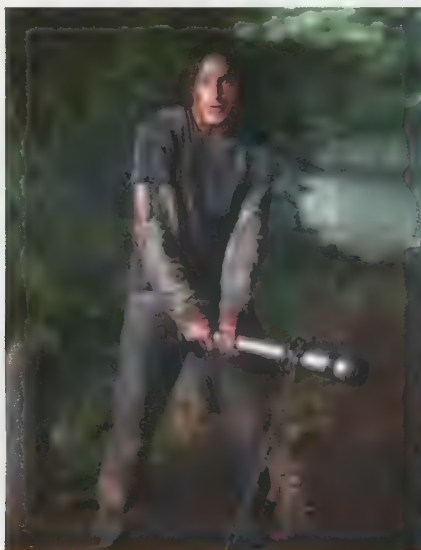
Avengers Assemble

Hollywood worships old gods, the kind whose favour can only be purchased by the blood of sacrifice and the sound of wailing. They know no truth, no reason but the law of pain. They feed on our fear because their own existence is built on it: the fear of overthrow, of new gods that will unseat them and steal their worship; fear of diminishment, the fading of their powers as the world turns and changes; most gnawing of all, the fear of loss of fear, as humanity grows too wise for worship and banishes them to ridicule and oblivion. Like modern-day Mayans counting down the apocalypse clock, Hollywood 2012 is building more of its cyclopean pyramids than ever, and relies ever more on new conquests in overseas territories to keep its temples of worship fed with human hecatombs. The call to sacrifice is woven into their songs. Their master narrative, the monomyth underpinning all creation, is one whose structure and meaning alike are built on the hero's sacrifice: the pivotal third-act choice where he gives up what he wants for what he needs to do for his people.

Certainly you can't swing a hammer this season without hitting an evil god or knocking over a sacrificial victim. Even the UK title **AVENGERS ASSEMBLE** is a summoning of ancient powers for a climactic act of blood repayment, though two along from me at the fan-packed screening someone was in absolute floods when she discovered what it was they end up avenging. But as the film whose mission is to have everything, it's not surprising that it manages not only a divine antagonist but a hero's journey beyond this world that culminates in an act of sacrifice and

a return to earth as saviour. Indeed, one of the many problems that even the Joss Whedon version of its long-troubled script hasn't quite managed to resolve is that the film version of Iron Man is not only the Avenger with the biggest box-office muscle but the one whose established screen persona is to have all the zinger lines. The only thing that stops him taking over the film, as Whedon has cannily written into Tony Stark's in-flight growth plan, is that he's "not the guy to make the sacrifice play" – until the time comes to take one for the team by delivering a nuclear suppository up a sphincter in space ("You know that's a one-way trip, right?") to take out the Chitauri mothership, whereupon all their bodies on earth will mysteriously collapse thanks to the kind of non-local quantum entanglement that alien armies from the other side of the universe are so prone to.

It clearly hasn't been much fun to try to get this insanely overstuffed folly to work, but Whedon has proved as up to the task as could fairly be expected of anyone. As the first actual comics writer to direct a Marvel film, Whedon has brought his usual wheels to the party: sharp dialogue, deftly balanced ensemble dynamics, and an indulgence of geek that goes quite deep in places, not least in an end-credits easter egg that can surely only leave lay audiences baffled. The long assembly phase takes in the obligatory hero-on-hero combinatorial duels, and the script bets heavily on the Hulk, whose arrival is made climactic on three separate occasions, and its lighter, less angsty take on the character plays well in the team environment. But pulling these disparate franchises into a single universe has clearly



The Cabin in the Woods

been a struggle of primordial proportions. Some of the heavy hammer-lifting was done by *Thor*, which opened the portal at last for the screen version of the Marvel universe to reach out to the stars and threaten Manhattan with cosmic invasion after a rather determinedly earthbound run to date. But it's still needed superhuman effort to bend the continuities into a unified shape. Bruce Banner was now openly researching supersoldier serum, rather than (as 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* retconned the Ang Lee version) being bamboozled by General Ross into supersoldier research in the belief that he was working on gamma radiation. More startlingly, Thor and the Asgardians have their divinity roundly denied and demoted to science-fictional similitude. "These guys are legends," Captain America is told: "they're basically gods." "There's only one God, ma'am," replies the old-school Cap, "and I'm pretty sure He doesn't dress like that." (Nor, he might add, does He speak lines like "You mewling quim!" – crossing fingers that the ratings boards don't speak god.) But it's an election year, so America's old gods are ripe for a comeback. "Aren't the Stars and Stripes a little old-fashioned?" asks Steve of his remade costume. "Everything that's happening, and things that are about to come to light," responds Col. Fury, "people might just need a little old-fashioned." Or maybe a large mojito.

In **THE CABIN IN THE WOODS** and its promotional interviews, Whedon and his directorial crime-mate Drew Goddard have been mischievously asking why we want to see young people repeatedly sacrificed to the ancient gods of nightmare in ever more gruesomely ingenious ways.



The Hunger Games

Whedon-watchers will recognise a lot of *Dollhouse*, and its cast, in this tiered reality comprising an above-ground entertainment engineered by a subterranean level of hi-tech whitecoats, where pulls of the rug expose unsuspected trapdoor plunges into twisty darknesses and an elevator to something more than a parking garage. Since the opening scene and the trailers reveal as much, its makers' earnest embargo on spoilers is a bit redundant aside from the precise nature of the relationship between these levels; and the opening credit montage of images of sacrifice from across human time and culture gives a pretty strong steer to anyone who isn't still stuck in the popcorn queue. For its first two-thirds, *Cabin* is a mildly amusing and still depressingly timely attempt to update the postmodern horror of the Kevin Williamson era for the audience of *Saw* and *Final Destination*, cutting between the quintet of innocent archetypes unknowingly guided on to a deterministic rollercoaster of doom by technocratic puppeteers. What lifts it into something more, and what nobody with any sense of humanity should spoil, is the third act, which takes the elements already in play and does a truly delightful thing with them that the closed worlds and character goals to date have carefully prepared you not to see coming, culminating a celebrity punch-cameo and an ending less good, but more mischievous, than the one you think they're going to pull.

The three-year chain of nightmares delaying *Cabin's* own release, including the MGM bankruptcy and a bizarre sign-of-times fight to remain in 2D, could only have been intended by an elder god of

mischievous, since it's wound up synchronising with **THE HUNGER GAMES**: essentially the same film but with the irony levels rendered apocalyptically uninhabitable. Suzanne Collins' novels of a dystopian post-armageddon American principate, where circuses take the place of bread and the annual sacrifice of teenage gladiators in an annual zero-sum games *sine missione* commemorates and spectacularises the violent founding of their New Romantic tyranny, are intoxicatingly effective young-adult fiction, if pretty much tosh as sf. There's one particular thing that happens towards the climax of the first book (it's on pages 405–6 of the UK edition, and wisely ditched in the film) that completely nukes any lingering illusion of science-fictional credibility. The recessive Collins has consistently taken the line that what she's doing is nothing to do with hormonal allegory and everything with engaging her readership imaginatively in the real-life trauma of war. But though this is one of the things she does rather well, particularly in the final volume, it's hard to feel the agenda is comfortably served by her heroic glamorisation of child soldiers; and where *Battle Royale* took the approach followed by *Cabin in the Woods* of postmodernising its spectacle to challenge its viewers' reaction, the *Hunger Games* books and film take a zero-tolerance view of the easy path of satire, leaving us straining accept at face value what's essentially an absurdist premise (since no society in history, however barbaric, has made a cultural spectacle of children killing each other).

But Collins is not what really you could call an ideas person, and indeed the



Wrath of the Titans

books owe their very existence to their author's ingenuously professed ignorance of all the other famous versions of her premise. Katniss Everdeen remains a hugely compelling YA creation, her stories concatenated from the ritual iteration of a sequence template where she anguishes about the role assigned her, goes in and forgets all her lines, and then watches herself on the screen and realises she was awesome. The film version inevitably struggles to capture the intense subjectivity of Katniss's narrative voice, and falls badly flat when it cuts away from her entirely to show her puppeteers alone in a world of Donald Sutherland tending his villain roses; but the loss is patched by a terrifying battery of extreme IMAX close-ups of Jennifer Lawrence's precociously expressive facial muscles pumping and twitching overtime. Lawrence herself is more persuasive as a 16-year-old than anyone else the wrong side of 20 (we're looking at you, Buffy Summers), and Josh Hutcherson well cast as her stocky, media-friendly unrequited squeeze; and if the fast, blurry, bloodless 12A violence is notably softened from the book, at least the novels' disconcertingly obsessive fixation with feminine depilation is faithfully represented, and the domestic box office numbers suggest that, statistical solecism notwithstanding, it may yet be possible for the odds to be ever in your favour.

"Without prayer, we gods lose our power," Zeus laments in **WRATH OF THE TITANS**, which returns us to its own age of heroes ten years on to find Andromeda recast, Perseus turned mysteriously Australian, and Gemma Arterton's strange character from the first film killed off in

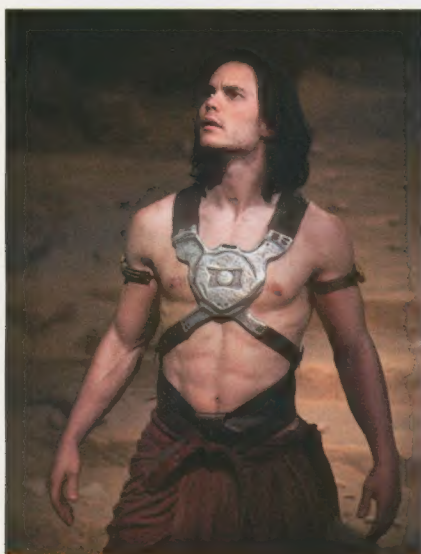
favour of a more Hollywood-compliant son, allowing Perseus to stand as the mortal link in a chain of variously dysfunctional fatherings stretching back to the generation of father-castrating, child-guzzling Cronus, who now threatens to bust out of Tartarus and break boldly with precedent by for once injecting some titular Titan into the actual film. Its big middle is a 3D catabasis to the heart of Tartarus through a Hephaestus-built labyrinth: "In order for Tartarus to be impregnable," explains Bill Nighy's bizarre Yorkshire demiurge, "I built it from the outside in, so I had to leave myself a way out when it was finished." ("Hang on," our heroes are too polite to ask: "then how did you get the prisoner in?") If not quite as strange as Tarsem Singh's *Immortals*, it's still a much weirder film than even its chaos-born 2010 predecessor, solemnly revisiting the Hesiodic theogony as a dynasty of screwed-up males all variously traumatised by their intergenerational legacy of truly titanic bad fathering. "Our father has offered us a deal," Hades reports to Zeus, who has to remind him: "Do you forget our father once tried to kill us?" Meanwhile Ares is scarred by Zeus's own parental neglect and turns against his own, while of the divine feminine there's not a trace; Athena is in the credits, but I didn't clock her in the film, and otherwise all the goddesses seem to be dead before we start. The pagan theology is also curiously hedged by intimations of its own afterlife. Bizarrely, there are no actual dead in *Wrath's* Hades; instead, "when your precious humans die, their souls go to another place. When a god dies, it's nothing; it's oblivion." But no loss: "There's no such thing as good gods,"



Mirror Mirror

grumbles Perseus. And indeed, like the late seasons of *Xena*, the plot indulges itself in promiscuous theoctony, taking a Diocletian delight in watching the pagan gods burn, till only one diminished and mortalised figure remains for whatever mad sequel is intended. "There will be no more sacrifices," we are promised: "no more gods." We'll believe that when Tartarus freezes over.

With his own fit of divine madness in *Immortals* still ringing in the ears, Tarsem Singh now squares off in the Snow White games with his huntsman-free **MIRROR MIRROR**: a jaunty comic take on the live-action fairytale that tries for a *Princess Bride*/*Stardust* vibe, but leads its heroine to a cabin of dwarfs in rather darker and more dismal woods than it quite intends. If *Titans* is a phallogocentric hymn to the erasure of the feminine, *Mirror Mirror* is an equally disturbed and primeval exploration of patriarchy overthrown, as Julia Roberts' top-billed evil stepmother eliminates the king-father and institutes a disorderly economy of oppressive feudal inequality, stealing Snow's bridegroom for herself and pushing her out into a life of crime and domestic service with society's cast-out undesirables. Fortunately Snow is a melter of hearts and a mender of broken societies, and knits her little people into a force for revolution; but with the return of the king (an almost inevitable Sean Bean, for the first time in his career looking positively uncomfortable in the role) she reverts to winsome bridehood, is given in marriage, and surrenders her political role to make a music video instead. The deeply repressive message to princesses in waiting is that stepmoms are evil and want you dead; that beauty is transient



John Carter

and youth a threat to aging leading ladies facing displacement by pretty young things; that you can live without a mom, but not without a dad to give you away and a prince to give you away to; and that no matter how good your swordplay and wire stunts, you'll give it all up for the kiss of true love. The dialogue is polished, Roberts and Armie Hammer deliver solid comic turns, and Tarsem's godlike costume designer, the late Eiko Ishioka, gets to dress an entire fairytale world in her trademark postmodern-baroque haute couture. But behind the mirror the old stories beckon and groan.

Before *Snow White* was a flake in Disney's eye, Bob Clampett spent much of the thirties vainly trying to launch **JOHN CARTER** as history's first full-length animated feature; and the century-long road that has culminated in Carter's arrival on screen at last under the Disney brand is littered with the corpses, and heavily ballasted with sunk development costs, of the many earlier versions at Disney and Paramount that never made it out of development Tartarus, while the out-of-copyright text has been strip-mined in the meantime by generations of opportunists from *Flash Gordon* to *Avatar*. To hope Andrew Stanton could project himself from Pixar to take charge of the biggest live-action investment in Disney's history was a leap of faith on an interplanetary scale, particularly when he was arriving on the scene of a property already burgled of everything of value; and *John Carter* has hugely surpassed the previous biggest moneyloser in sf film history, Peter Hyams' disastrous 2005 *A Sound of Thunder* (from the most famous work by Barsoom's



Battleship

greatest heir). Nevertheless, thanks largely to the Russians' generous bailout of Disney by flocking to *Carter* in droves after it bombed domestically, the film actually looks on course to cover its production costs, with Disney's residual \$200m write-off attributable entirely to its staggering marketing and distribution spend.

Burroughs' essentially autobiographical fantasy was a pencil-sharpener salesman's dream of a heroic second life in a world of pulp adventure, and the text of *A Princess of Mars* shows him acquiring almost page-by-page the precocious fluency in the grammar of pulp-serial narrative that six months later would lead to the birth of Tarzan. But the challenge with Barsoom for film is that cinematically it's a bit of a dump, an arid and largely sterile wasteland all too easily simulated, as here, by digitally titivated Utah locations. And after the collapse of so many earlier versions at Disney in the nineties and repeatedly at Paramount in the decade after, Burroughs' raw narrative material has been pulped and recycled in so many different forms that it's hard for any version not to seem the product of exhaustion; and Stanton's take as script-pimped by Michael Chabon has the feeling of a story that long ago broke out of anyone's overall control. Despite that, much about the film is sensationally good: the storyboarding is very strong, the 3D IMAX cinematography thrilling, and it's quite difficult not to be pleasantly disarmed by Taylor Kitsch's Carter and Lynn Collins' Dejah Thoris. But the plot is an overthought mess, with a silly wedding plot for Dejah, a largely pointless pilgrimage down the Iss, and a strange reconception

of Burroughs' Thents as an interplanetary race of Galactus-like interstellar parasites hopping from one ecological collapse to the next; while the overlong double prologue gets bogged down in the western segment, in which Chabon's hand seems particularly visible. It's nice to see the period setting restored, and the Burroughs frame-character's role and plot is quite attractively expanded, with a neat resolution to the vexed question of Carter's mystic transplantation that would have made for a watchable sequel. But Burroughs' often stark anthropology, and his complex post-racist engagement with primitivism and violence in the Tharks' brutalising society, have been disappointingly softened for film, and it doesn't feel much like the Burroughs we thought we remembered.

With Hemsworth-like ubiquity Kitsch returns before he's even gone away as another military outcast in quest of redemption against alien attackers in **BATTLESHIP**, Peter Berg's lavish venture into a space beyond irony where Hasbro underwrites a film about the US Navy battling alien invasion by branding it around their boardgame version of the grid-based pastime our great-grandfathers played on the decks at Jutland. In a world where all films with a global-audience budget, even Joss Whedon's, are essentially Michael Bay films, *Battleship* is the one that most faithfully respects its master's cinematic values, in what is effectively a replay of *Pearl Harbor* with Decepticons in place of the Japanese, who are now promoted prominently to our own team alongside Kitsch's failing officer cadet, propelled Kirklike to captaincy of a



Lockout

destroyer in a force-bubble contained Pacific war against a five-ship alien invasion that can only be taken out by inferring the antagonists' location on a grid. It's not even the year's first film to play live-action Battleship, thanks to a peculiar scene in *Mirror Mirror* where the Queen calls out grid references in a chess mashup with Ishioka-dressed courtiers firing broadsides out of bonkers hats. (I noted down the moves, but they seem to be nonsense.) But Battleships (which was always plural in my school) is a shrewdly chosen icon of the film's solemn themes of continuity and evolution in a tradition reaching back past living memory to an age when Barsoom was young. As homemade entertainment on graph paper, the game goes back to the age of family evenings round the pianoforte. Milton Bradley's manipulable-pieces version, now Hasbro's, only made its debut in 1967, and swiftly put the numerous pre-printed pad-and-paper versions from rival companies out of business. The Rihanna generation, who know only the Hasbro version from the bottom of the games cupboard in primary school, marvel now at their ancestors' having to shade in squares manually with sticks of graphite. One marker of the vintage origins is that the film has to explain that in today's US Navy there's no such thing as a battleship – until the museum-piece *Missouri* is preposterously unmothballed for the final act, and WW2 vets join with their present-day legatees to save the world and make our hero a man.

Battleship's supporting themes of sibling rivalry and sacrifice feature heavily in Luc Besson's space-prison romp **LOCKOUT**:

one of the master's farmed-out projects, this one co-written and directed by cinematographer John Mather with Stephen St Leger. Maggie Grace returns to the narrative role of daughter-in-jeopardy that did the business in *Taken*, only this time she's the President's daughter, and her takers are five hundred of earth's most hardened Besson-esque in an orbital jail they've overpowered under the leadership of an eerily Besson-like Vincent Regan and his psycho Glaswegian brother. Luckily Guy Pearce's badass Bourne-like is somewhere vaguely in the same film, and a careless riffle of pages from what seem to be unrelated plot drafts sees a set-up Guy sentenced to the same space prison after the riot has started, only to have his sentence overturned before he's been delivered, and to enter from the outside in his special-ops capacity. "You wait till you've got a serious sacrifice to make," Mags' bleeding-heart penal reformer lectures him between the explosions, "and then you'll find out who you really are." And so it plays. Alfonso Cuarón has a whole film, the upcoming *Gravity*, about the challenge of re-entry for a spacewalking astronaut stranded in orbit without a ship and trying to find a way back to earth in real-time, continuous-take 3D before her air runs out. None of that nonsense for Besson, who simply blasts our heroes out of the sky in their suits and lets them sail down through re-entry on a single chute, as the plot descends to earth for a final sequence of back-home bonus twists and the hero reveals his name, which turns out to derive from an action god of old who is never far from mind in *John Carter*. For ever and ever, amen.

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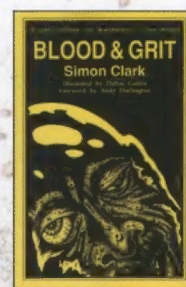
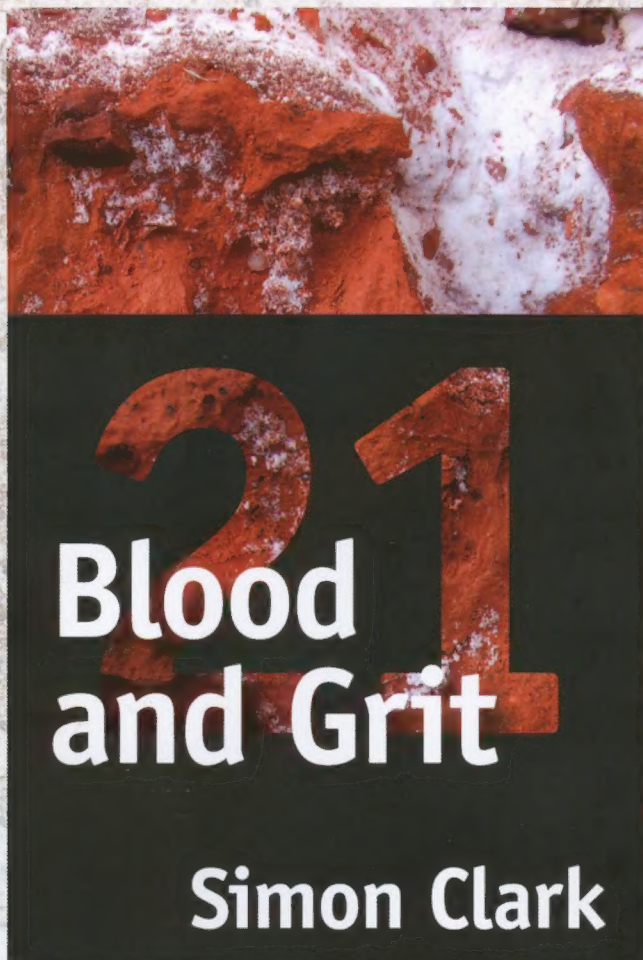
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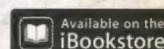
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